

じん(自然の敵P)

イラストしづ

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↑ -the
missing
children- ↓

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Kagerou Daze IV - the missing children –

Prologue

Today will be the first time that I've written in a diary.

And as such, I'm honestly still in the process of thinking of what I should be writing.

Even if I were to write about "today's happenings," there really isn't much about our life here that's particularly worth mentioning, so what am I to do?

Ahh, but if I were to say something like that, I'd have to apologize to him, wouldn't I? Let me correct myself.

Let's see— As for something that happened today... Today was the first time we brought our daughter outside of the house.

As I watched her eyes sparkle and take in everything, it was as if... It was as if I was looking at how I once used to be.

Oh, yes, and when our daughter chased after a large bee, you can imagine how panicked he was.

In the end, she couldn't keep up with it, and this time, the bee started chasing after me, instead. As expected, the two of us burst into laughter at that.

Soon, yet another summer will come since we started living here.

Come to think of it, it had also been a midsummer day when we came here.

And as I start to remember, for the first time, I am surprised by how quickly time passes.

How many more times will the three of us be able to greet summer together?

How many more times will the three of us be able to laugh together?

Thinking about these things leaves me with a slightly hollow feeling inside, so I won't.

A diary is something that should be enjoyable to reread someday. Yes, I'll strive to make today's entry such.

In any case, I will write not only about what happened today, but about all the different things I've seen and heard up until now.

Yes, that sounds good.

If, one day, our daughter finds interest in the outside world, I hope that this diary will be of some use to her. That is what I think.

Starting tomorrow, I will write with more detail.

It's a rare present from him, after all, so I should write it in every day.

With that, today I'll bring the entry to a close.

I hope that tomorrow will be another good day.

Shinigami Record I

I was in a dark place.

Without a right nor left, an up nor a down.

Without cold or heat.

That was the kind of place it was.

Shinigami Record I

Even now that I know what "time" is, I still do not know how much time I spent there.

In the first place, while I was there, I wasn't even aware of what "dark" was.

It wasn't until I eventually encountered "light" that I realized that I had been in a dark place.

It seems to be a common thing in this world.

When you encounter new things, it's only then that you come to understand the things from before.

I encountered "today," and learned of "yesterday,"

I encountered "morning," and learned of "night."

It was only very recently that I encountered "winter," and learned of "summer."

As I gained this knowledge, I realized for the first time that this world is constantly and dramatically transforming.

In place of the darkness that had reigned until that moment, the world was suddenly filled with a great variety of things, and it would change with every blink.

When I blinked for the first time, that was when I first became interested in this world that I had not even been conscious of.

The "sky" that alternates between light and dark.

The "ocean" that sparkles blue in response to streaming rays of sunlight.

The "rain" that pours down on the "earth."

And the "life" that emerges there.

Without being told by anyone, I watched "them," who appeared in this world, and continued to try and figure out what each of them were in order to understand them.

All the things that were born one after another, and eventually rotted away, I simply continued to learn about them.... I believe I did this for a fairly long time.

In order to not leave out anything that could become a reference—that was how long I spent watching the transformation of this world.

And one day, I realized something.

Once I started thinking, I really hated to stop.

Just like when I had been in the darkness, and had decided to continue being there without thinking about anything, inside of my head, which had now acquired “knowledge,” questions began to arise one after another.

“What is this?”

“How was that made?”

“Why is this here?”

With no way or reason to suppress this curiosity, I surrendered to the questions and continued on my journey of learning each coming day.

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One time, when I entered a cavern and was following a narrow path, I ended up in a huge space opened up by a lake.

Through cracks in the rock face’s ceiling here and there, sunlight streamed in and illuminated the surface of the lake.

As I found myself staring at a single, faintly illuminated point on the water’s surface, a small shadow was reflected.

Swaying, and almost as if it were watching me as it lingered there, it had a different shape than any other living thing I had seen until now.

At first, I didn’t pay it any mind. Living things weren’t hard to come by at all, and no matter what it was, it wasn’t strange.

However, what surprised me was that it seemed to acknowledge me.

At that time, it seemed unbelievable to me that I was being watched by something.

With all the creatures that I had encountered up until now, I acknowledged that we appeared to be fellow creatures, but not a single one had ever actually acknowledged me back.

Although that shadow there didn’t have anything like “eyes,” I thought that it was staring closely at me.

My curiosity piqued, I faced that shadow, and soon came to realize that it was unmistakably my own.

It was a shock to me.

Why hadn't I noticed it until now, that I, the same as other beings, had my own shape?

The first time I encountered "my own form," my mind was flooded with curiosity.

"When did I start looking like this?" "What do I look like here?" "Why do I look like this?" I examined every inch of my own body in that way.

However, I was not able to come up with answer regarding any of those questions.

It was a strange sensation.

As if I didn't understand myself.

Even though I had been able to learn about other beings....

"Who was it that created me?"

Because of that sudden question, for a moment, my mind was filled with thoughts.

When it came down to it, perhaps I was the same as the "creatures" that had suddenly appeared one day.

However, if I was the same as them, there must be something, somewhere, which had given birth to me, but during this long period of time, I had yet to encounter such a being.

In the first place, I had watched the beginning of all "living things" In that way, I must have been born in a way fundamentally different from them.

Furthermore, with time, they became unable to maintain their shape, and while they eventually became extinct, I still had not the slightest hint of that, and therefore looking at it this way, it made more sense to consider that I was something completely different.

But....

"Then, what am I?"

Up until now, I had been on this journey of learning by following each thing that I came across, but I had never once thought about myself.

In order to seek out some kind of answer for this question, I at last began to earnestly think about it.

Closing my eyes, I immersed myself in the darkness that spread out before sleep.

I remembered the darkness from back then that was very similar to this.

I would follow the traces.

Once more, from the beginning.

*

.....How much time had passed?

I had already been here for a fair amount of time, on a journey of recollection to find an explanation for myself.

I relied on all the knowledge that I had accumulated up until now, and continued to follow one miraculous revelation after another.

It was mind-numbing..... No, it wasn't actually to that extent, but it almost felt like so; that was how long this road had been.

And, with only my curiosity to propel me forward on this thought journey, I had finally reached the end.

I traced my memories from the earliest beginning that I could recall, until the moment I closed my eyes here.

However, the conclusion that I came to in the end.....

".....I don't understand."

I was completely devastated at this conclusion, at the answer that I had come up with.

I realized that in the end, I couldn't explain my own existence, no matter what.

Even in the worst situation, there had never been anything that I hadn't been able to understand, given time, but this time?

Although I repeated the endless cycle of recollection, the answer still would not appear.

Truthfully, to be faced with such a question that I couldn't find an answer to was very irritating.

Irritation.... huh.

Perhaps this was also one other by-product of recollecting.

As I considered this, my thoughts slackened, and I opened my eyes for the first time in a while.

As before, the surface of water before me reflected my form. A black shadow. Without a head, feet, or a tail, a merely black being was there.

In regards to my indescribable appearance, the irritation I felt early began to stir even further.

If only my appearance, I wish that it have been a shape that was easier to understand.

If only I had feet, and a head.... If I had that kind of form, I would be having a much easier time coming up with an explanation that I was right now.

When I thought of those things, as if as an allusion, suddenly, two faint red spots arose on the black shadow on the water's surface.

It was the color of the blood that flowed from living things, a color that seemed to shine.

Although it was a little surprising that I had undergone a change, I was able to keep unexpectedly calm about it.

Were these..... "eyes"? I was certain that they had not been there either, but.....

I see. So I have "eyes."

It would seem that I was finally like other creatures, but was I really? There was still something that set me off apart from them, but what was it.....

With this newly acquired information, I prepared to go back to thinking, but at that moment, I heard from behind me, the sound of small rocks grinding against each other.

Although caught off guard, I calmly made my judgment.

I knew this sound. It was the sound of moving creatures as their feet met the ground.

I reflexively looked in the direction of the noise. It would seem that the owners of the noise were travelling by the path that I had come here by.

Judging by the noise as it drew closer, they were mostly likely small creatures that walked on two legs. Several of them.

As I thought this, what soon appeared were several small creatures, as I had predicted.

However, they were also ones that I had never seen before.

What made them foreign was that they carried branches that were alight with fire.

They must have advanced through the dark cave using the light from those.

Giving in to my interest, I started intently at them, and those creatures finally drew closer to me.

When they did, I was able to see their appearances more clearly by the glow of the fire.

They were wearing, as if it were fur, something that seemed to be woven into fibers from organic material.

Besides that, they had at their waists what seemed to be small rocks, intentionally-sharpened to be used as self-defense, presumably.

To know how to deal with fire, as well, it would seem that they were rather intelligent creatures.

Looking around at their surroundings, their behavior seemed to indicate that they were cautious about something. Perhaps that was the type of caution they displayed around predators.

With their size, they seemed likely to be swallowed in an instant if they were to encounter a much larger creature.

As I thought of these things, I continued to watch them, and unexpectedly, they stopped, raised their torches as if to shine light in my direction, and let out loud cries.

Piercing cries that one might let out right before being eaten. Caught off guard by this, I immediately started thinking.

What!? With what intention were they making all this noise for!?

Without showing any hospitality towards me, and without ceasing their cries, the creatures had begun swinging the fire that they had in their hands.

In the darkness, the madder red afterglow danced to and fro in the air.

“Fire”

Something that burns.

That much, I knew. But, why were they swinging around such a thing?

It was as if they were trying to drive something away. I wasn't able to completely understand their actions, but the moment the tip of the swaying flames touched me, I abruptly realized the meaning.

My composed thoughts stopped, and in their place, a terrible sensation that I had never experienced before filled my mind.

“Hot”

Hot hot hot hot.

I was greatly confused by this sharp, instantaneous, and violent sensation.

What is this!?

It hurts!

It's hot!

I don't get this, it's painful, I can't take it!

The creatures before me, illuminated by the fire, had their eyes wide open, and I was unmistakably captured by that gaze.

My mind filled with intense pain, and I felt an unpleasant, shock-like sensation run through me.

Panicking, I pulled my body back as to not be exposed to the flames a second time, and watched as they left orange streaks in the air.

I tried to twist my body to put further distance between the flames and myself, but the area that had been burned pulsed in pain, and I wasn't able to find the strength.

I couldn't escape from this wave of pain. As I came to realize this, I learned, for the first time since I was born, the thing called "fear."

Why?

I had never been burned by fire until now.

On the contrary, even though I hadn't come into contact with anything, what was the meaning of this?

I tried desperately to think, but the new sensation that had implanted itself in my body, "fear," interfered with my thoughts.

Although the creatures seemed surprised that I had jumped back, they thrust the flames in my direction once more.

It was useless even if I tried to get away from here.

Both my thoughts and my body were too overwhelmed by what was happening to keep up.

All I could do was tremble in fear of those who continued to bring me pain.

What was the matter with them—they were scary. What did they intend to do with me?

Living things attacking others? What was the meaning of that.....

".....Do they intend to devour me?"

The moment I thought of this, my mind became filled with even more fear.

The reason that living things attack other living things in this world.

Often times, that was for “predation.”

For the sake of keeping themselves alive, they devour other life.

That’s right, I knew about this.

In that case, would I be devoured by something stronger, just like the others, and be devoured by these creatures and die?

That was surely it.

After all, despite how I was currently trying to retreat, they were relentlessly advancing towards me.

Ahh, they were going to kill me.

I might actually be devoured.

Would I die?

What happens when you die?

Would I no longer be able to even think?

All of a sudden, the fire-bearing creatures took out a mineral with a strange shape.

It seemed that some kind of liquid was sloshing around inside.

Without hesitation, the creatures emptied the contents at me.

The next moment, the creatures set fire to me with the flames that they held.

As I was burned by flames that nearly completely obstructed my view, intense pain surged through my body.

Even when I tried to get away, my body was stiff with fear, and as if denying movement, it would not respond.

“It’s hot. It hurts. I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die!”

My head was filled with those things.

Trembling from all this fear, I came to realize that this was the end for me; it was at that moment that something about the continuing cries of the creatures made me unable to believe my ears.

“We’ll kill you! Monster!”

The thunderous shouting had not changed from before.

However, in my mind, the cries of those creatures seemed to indicate that kind of intention.

Before I could try and comprehend this new sensation, my unsympathetic “consciousness” was already slowly slipping away.

My vision blurred, and gradually darkened. And at the same time, I felt both the pain and fear of my burning body lessen bit by bit.

Without any way to resist, and unable to see anything, in my conscious that finally seemed to be fading away, only the cries of the creatures echoed throughout my head.

“.....What is it!? What happened!?”

“Snakes! Dammit, that hurts..... They’re crawling! Watch out!”

What were they clamoring about?

What was a “snake”?

I didn’t know the meaning of the word but it was clear that they felt fear at its presence.

Somehow, I was able to grasp at least that much.

“We’ll pulling out!”

Soon after, one of the creatures that was farther away shouted this, and I heard the sound of feet kicking against the ground.

It would seem that they had started running.

But, why were they suddenly running away?

Were they so afraid of this being called snake?

I was still unable to see anything, but from the sounds of their running, I was able to clearly understand what it meant.

The remaining creatures followed after, the sound of their pounding feet echoing. It seemed that they were heading towards the opening of the cave.

Please, just leave me alone, I prayed.

Although their panicked, retreating footsteps had ceased, the remaining sound reverberations reflected off the rock walls and still echoed.

In any case, they seemed to have left for some reason, and I had managed to hang onto my life.

No, perhaps not.

I was still unable to see my surroundings, and I no longer felt any pain.

Perhaps I had already died from the pain.

As those thoughts crossed my mind, I heard some kind of pulsing noise in the midst of the silence.

I hadn't heard it from outside. Rather, it seemed to be coming from inside.....

“.....ah!?”

Suddenly, pain surged through the areas that had been burned. It was a sharp sensation that seemed to pierce my mind, causing me to cry out.

At the same time, my vision returned, and my head, which had felt light and hollow, began to spin.

Panicked, I looked around. The creatures that had been on the banks of the lake were already nowhere to be seen.

As I thought, I hadn't been mistaken about the fact that they had run off.

Although I could finally feel relieved, sharp pain continued to flow through my body along with the pulsing sound that resonated from inside.

Pain..... Together with fear; both were sensations that were hard to bear.

Judging by their behavior earlier, it seemed that they also experienced these things.

“Pain” gives birth to “fear.”

It was ironic, but at the least, I could understand pain.

By the look of things, it did not seem like these feelings of pain that came and went would be disappearing anytime soon. However, although this pain remained, compared to death, it didn't feel like much.

Even I was surprised at how much I valued my own body.

Gradually, my mind returned to normal, and I began to recollect what had just happened.

They..... The fire-bearing creatures, just what were they?

Without a doubt, they had clearly come at me with a murderous intent, and tried to kill me.

Thinking back on it, they were frightening creatures.

To me, were they the "stronger ones"?

Pathetic as it was, my body began trembling again.

I had never wanted to learn of this feeling called "fear."

I wanted to forget about it as soon as possible, but this sensation had embedded itself so deeply in my roots that it didn't seem like it would be so easily forgotten.

.....I see. So the expressions that I had seen on other creatures in their moments of death—was it because of this?

What I had experienced earlier was a sensation that was like having everything taken from me, forever. A sensation like falling into a bottomless darkness.

In this world, that kind of hopeless thing happened too many times a day to keep count of.

Thinking of it that way, I suddenly found this world to be very frightening.

It wasn't just my own existence that I didn't understand, but also much about this world; up until now, I had only barely seen the surface of it.

After going through a change, I was able to see the world now in a very different way.

The moment I realized my ignorance, that was when I felt like I was somehow finally a part of this world.

I had never even considered the thought of being afraid of something. For now, I would surrender to this tremendous change that I had undergone.

.....Come to think of it, they had been afraid of something they called “snake,” but what exactly was it?

Curious, I looked over to where they had been standing and saw something wriggling menacingly.

A copious amount of what looked like black, elongated tentacles were intertwined and crawling on the ground.

“Ah.....!”

The moment I saw them, my mind was filled with confusion once more.

It seemed that fear was something that you would feel again after experiencing it once. It was deeply troubling.

Was that the “snake” that the fire-bearing creatures had been shuddering in fear of? It seemed that there were several of them. Was it possible they would also.....?

My body felt the danger and had begun trembling again, but one of the beings known as a “snake” came slithering towards me regardless of that.

It would seem that I had changed into a form that other living things were able to notice.

I understood this, but I had no way of combating against other living things.

If I were to be attacked again, I would not be able to do anything.

I tried to put strength into my body to get away from the fear.

However, just as before, I wasn’t able to move my body very well.

It was as if I no longer understood how to control my body to move, and all the strength that I gathered disappeared somewhere.

Even so, I desperately tried to make my body run, but the snake had already come close enough to kill me if it did indeed intend to attack.

“I..... Ah, d-don’t kill me!”

Panicked, I cried out without thinking.

Those words reflected off the cavity of the stone words and echoed endlessly.

It was, obviously, the first time that I had ever shouted, and I was so shocked at my own outburst that my body stiffened.

For some reason, I felt ashamed, and even more confusion filled my head.

Don't kill me.

I had intended to shout with that meaning, but would the snake be able to understand it?

The snake stopped moving, darted out its tongue, and suddenly began to speak.

"Earlier, we attacked those humans because they were very terrible creatures that destroyed our dwelling. We have no reason to kill you."

I was able to grasp the snake's intentions very well.

It had clearly stated that it would not kill me.

As if they had heard this snake's intentions, or perhaps had not even the need to, the other wriggling snakes dispersed and vanished somewhere.

It would seem that they dwelled here in this cave.

While I had been deep in thought, had enough time passed for them to be born and breed?

All of a sudden, whether it was from the joy of mutual awareness from the snake, or from relief of the lack of hostility, I gradually felt my eyes grow hot.

"Are you crying?"

".....Cry? What is that?"

"Ahh, you don't know?I see, I see... So you don't understand anything."

Saying this, the snake curled up its body, and darted out its tongue out about twice.

"This is not so. I have watched this world much longer than you have. I know all the general things."

Despite the fact that only a short while ago, there had been many things I didn't understand, and many things I had only now come to learn about, I ended up saying such a thing.

Feelings of regret began to spiral inside my head. Honestly, I should have said that I was ignorant, so why had I exaggerated it?

"Then, what are you?"

As expected, I was startled by the snake's words.

Whether or not it really knew or not, it had accurately pinpointed the thing that I knew next to nothing about.

Even if thoughts such as, "Spiteful bastard," swirled within me, there was no changing the situation, so I answered honestly.

".....Th-that, I do not know. I had just intended to find out."

It definitely would not go well with suddenly saying I didn't know, but there was no other way to answer.

To say that I barely knew would come to no good. I would refrain from saying careless things from now on.

At my answer, the snake answered briefly, "I see."

It seemed to be that it was looking down on me, and I felt another twinge of annoyance, but as the snake began to speak again, I kept silent.

"Ah, I apologize. It's simply that, you speak in our tongue, so I was curious. And still, to want to know about yourself—what a strange creature you are."

I heard what the snake said, but I could not understand the meaning of its words.

It was "strange" to want to learn about myself?

It made little sense to me what that meant.

"What are you even saying? Do you know what I could possibly be?"

When I asked this, the snake replied, "I wonder. I haven't the faintest idea either," and as usual, as if mocking me, quickly flicked out its tongue. And, as if remembering something, the snake continued.

“Ah, you may be able to find some kind of lead with the humans. They are also living things that aim to understand themselves, so perhaps they will serve as something like a ‘mirror’ for you.”

What were humans? As I thought about it for a while, I realized that the “humans” the snake spoke of referred to the creatures that had attacked me earlier, and I was overcome by outrage.

“Am I to meet with such beings again!? They tried to kill me a while ago! And regardless, what could I possibly learn about myself from them.....”

I suddenly remembered one thing that they had said to me, and I stopped speaking.

“.....Monster.”

Yes, they had called me “monster.”

They, who had called me such without hesitation—those humans may actually know something about me.

However.....

“.....It is true that they seemed to know what I was, but I was close to being killed by them. If they attack me again the next time we meet, then they are the enemy.”

Yes, being attacked was scary.

It is such a fearsome thing that all living things will desperately and blindly try to avoid it at all costs.

“I see. You should decide for yourself what to do, because you are the only one that can find out.”

“Ohh.....What am I do?”

If I did not meet the humans again, I would not be able to find out what I was.

However, the problem was that they might attack me upon sight, just as before.

As if tired of watching me worrying with no end, the snake spoke up slowly.

“Hm. Then, think about why those humans attacked you.”

“.....Is it not because we are of different species? I have noticed that to be the same with other creatures.”

“Then, how can you avoid being attacked?”

“How? How..... If I were to have the same appearance as them, would that not keep them from attacking?”

Saying this after some thought, the snake swung its neck, and seemed to be instructing, “Look at the lake.”

“.....Hm? Are you telling me to see myself? And what point is there in doing such a thing?”

The snake did not answer my question, and instead, continued to gesture as if saying, “Just do it.”

“What could I possibly.....”

As I said this, I tried to move my body, but as before, it was difficult.

“Ugh..... What is the meaning of this.....”

However, through abrupt, jerky movements, I was able to manage to move, bit by bit, which was considerably better than before.

For what reason was I doing this?

My mind flooded with complaints over the snake’s instructions.

In the first place, would not the reflection in the lake only show a shadow, like what I had seen before? What would I gain from confirming that?

If I learned nothing from this, I would do something to that snake.

Ah, no, the snake was strong. It would be pointless.

Dragging my body, I finally made it to the banks of the lake.

Although it was such a short distance, I already felt great exhaustion.

It had never been like this before, so really, what had happened to me?

As I thought this, I stared into the lake, and what I saw was someone completely unexpected, leaving me speechless.

In the faintly lit, green surface of the water, there was a pale, peach-colored creature.

Its appearance was unmistakably that of a human.

Shocked at this sudden sight, my body flinched and I let out a cry.

However, the human reflected in the lake showed no sign of attacking, and with an indescribable expression, jumped back just like I had.

Returning to my senses, I very slowly looked back.

Taking a moment to think, even I was able to grasp what this situation meant.

“This.....is me!?”

I, who had previously looked like nothing more than a black shadow, was for some reason, now reflected on the water’s surface looking very similar to a “human.”

Although it was a small body when in comparison to the humans from earlier, the shape was unmistakable.

It was not covered with the fur-like thing that they had on, but the structure of the body looked like that of a human.

“Wh-wha.....!”

Recently, there were many things that confused me, and without exception, I was greatly confused once more.

With how odd things kept happening one after another, it was only natural.

As if to match how I felt, the me that was reflected on the water’s surface also had their mouth agape with a speechless expression.

Ahh, so is this the kind of face I make when I’m confused? I wondered to myself.

Gathering strength in my arm, the me that was reflected on the water’s surface also moved their arm.

In this way, I repeatedly felt my body with my two arms, and as I touched each part with my fingers, it transmitted to my brain the message, “My body is here.”

The heat that I felt from this body was warm in a way that was completely different from fire.

The more I touched, the more my mind gradually accepted my body’s existence.

It was in the act of awareness that what finally awakened all the senses in my entire body.

The voice that I had unconsciously used must have come from this throat.

And if I had been moving with these legs, I realized how difficult it must have been.

Driven by my interest, I continued to feel my body in silence, and just as quietly, the image of the snake became reflected in the water's surface that I was gazing at.

"You've taken this appearance since earlier, but as you were, you did not seem aware of it."

As the snake said this, I continued feeling my body, replied with, "I only just realized," and put my hands down.

"I can finally understand myself now. How exactly have I come to this?"



I asked, and the snake replied, "That, too, I do not know. I've never seen a creature such as you before now."

I did not know how many more living things had been born in the time that I had spent thinking here, but as far as the snake had seen, there weren't any that were like me.

Although I had acquired a body and speech, among other things, it did not seem like I would be able to find the answer to that right this moment.

However, despite saying insinuating things, this snake did not seem like he would be as much help to me as I had expected. As I started thinking this, the snake started to speak again, "However..."

Afraid for a moment that he could read my thoughts, I calmly replied, "What is it?"

"You are very strange. Suddenly emerging from an empty place, changing your appearance in various ways, and understanding the speech of other creatures..... To me, I see that you are about to change into 'something.'"

"You mean that I am going to become me? Don't speak gibberish. I am me. That is what I am going to find out."

As I said this, the snake darted out his tongue quickly, and backed down with, "No, I know, I know. It's merely nonsense, so pay it no mind."

"Now then, I will be returning to my dwelling soon. It was a pleasure to meet an interesting creature such as you."

"You're leaving? I apologize for any trouble I've caused."

"It was no trouble at all," the snake replied, and disappeared somewhere.

Only I was left behind in the silence.

As before, my appearance that mimicked the humans continued to be reflected in the water's surface.

".....Human"

I raised my arm again, and made a fist with my hand several times.

At this rate, it shouldn't take long to become accustomed to moving this body.

At the very least, I realized that I wouldn't be able understand the things I truly wanted to know by remaining in this cavern.

"I would prefer to not be attacked, but....."

After I left this cave, I would most likely go to meet the humans.

I honestly still did not know what meaning there was to that, but until I found out the true meaning behind the word "monster," which they had spoken, my curiosity would not be satisfied.

".....In any case, what a slender body this is. If only I appeared more powerful."

What had become of the outside world?

At the least, I hoped that it wasn't winter now.

After all, it was a season that was much too quiet and uninteresting.

It would be preferable if it was the ever-changing summer, but who could say?

With slight expectations and many anxieties in my heart, I staggered towards the opening of the cavern.

Children Record III

"....That teacher must be an alien or something. I don't get what he's saying at all."

After checking her surroundings, Ayano whispered this.

It was sunny outside.

A true summer day with a seemingly overabundance of crying cicadas in the sweltering heat.

Sitting lightly in her window seat in the very back of the classroom, Ayano glanced at me, waiting for my reply.

"Ahh, yeah, I guess."

Knowing that something annoying had started again, I just went along with it and said whatever, making Ayano drop her shoulders and lay her head down on the desk.

“Auu, Shintaro, you’re so cold today, too...”

“It’s because you’re saying dull things. What do mean, ‘alien’? You just don’t understand the lesson, right?”

“W-well, yeah, but...”

Flipping through the pages of the textbook, there wasn’t anything particularly difficult written.

In the first place, this person was just way too dumb. If you couldn’t understand a lesson like this one, doesn’t that make you the alien instead?

“Don’t they say that only idiots blame other people? Anyway, you got a bad score on the last test, didn’t you? Won’t you have to take summer courses at this rate? In the first place, you...”

Usually, after being scolded this much, she’d reply with, “I’m sorry, I’m an idiot. Please forgive me,” but she seemed to be holding out today.

When I looked over with these thoughts in mind, Ayano had sat up again, and was glaring in my direction.

Because that face was such a contrast from her usual gentle demeanor, I couldn’t help flinching.

“Wh-what? Are you angry?”

I asked slowly, but Ayano did not answer my question, and instead began speaking matter-of-factly.

“Although you say things like that to me, Shintaro... I know about you. Because you’re smart, you don’t need to study, and instead spend your time looking at dirty sites on the internet. You did that yesterday, too, right?”

Ayano’s words were so unexpected and heavy that my heart started pounding.

I started trying to reason it in my head immediately, “Why does she know about something like that? No, it’s not possible. I always delete my browser history, and as long as there aren’t any security cameras.....”

I wondered where the speed of my thought process came from in time like these.

In any case, my brain began coming up with excellent excuses at an unparalleled speed.

Taking the commands from my brain, I immediately prepared the excuses in the back of my throat, ready to say them. I could do this. It was perfect.

“Wh-what!? Wh-wh-what are you even talking about!? I-I don’t look at that kind of thing at all! I’m not even interested in that stuff ! I’ve never looked at it before in my life!”

However, the excuses I had prepared went unused, and in their place, extremely suspicious excuses flew out of my mouth.

Even I could hear how fake they sounded, and as I started to sweat, the reply of “Hmm” that I received accelerated my sweat even further.

Next, Ayano looked at me with scorn and stood up with a loud clatter.

She then leaned towards me, moving in close to my face.

“Liar. I’ve heard all about it, you know?”

Because of the amount of distance between us, the scent of the shampoo from Ayano’s long, black hair lingered in the air more than was necessary.

My excellent brain seemed to have caught on to the scent as well, and was immediately reduced to a disabled stare.

No, but honestly, there was no way she could have heard about anything. My browsing history should be clear. I wouldn’t make a mistake there. I was absolutely confident about that.

“Wh-who did you even hear it from!? And hey, you’re way too close!”

I shouted desperately. Because of the fact that Ayano was so close, I couldn’t face her unless I raised my voice a considerable amount.

“Who.....?”

Ayano smiled wide, and slowly moved her face close to my ear. The intense scent of the shampoo finally hung over me, and I had already stiffened, unable to move.

It was no use; I couldn't understand what she intended to do anymore. With no longer any way out, all I could do was close my eyes.

And as if to dispel my tenseness, Ayano whispered this in my ear:

".....Have you forgotten about me, Master?"

".....Wait, Ene!"

When I opened my eyes, I saw neither Ene nor Ayano.

The classroom that I had been seeing earlier had also completely disappeared.

In their place, I saw plumbing pipes crisscrossed on a ceiling, a single light bulb hanging down from it, and Kido looking down at me while drying her hair with a towel.

"Not Ene, it's Kido."

Looking like she'd just come out of the bath, Kido was wearing a T-shirt, and had the scent of shampoo drifting from her as she stood with an annoyed expression.

".....R-right. Sorry."

"I don't care what kind of dream you were having, but it's already morning. It's time to wake up soon."

And with that, Kido walked off towards the entrance while still drying her hair.

As I stared blankly at the ceiling, I could hear Kido's voice from the direction of the entrance.

"Come on, it's morning. Wake up. Where do you think you're sleeping?"

When she'd suddenly headed for the entrance, I'd thought it was careless to go out in a T-shirt and with her hair still wet, but it made sense to me now.

Sure enough, I heard Konoha's voice say, "Eh? Ah, where is this?" He should have been sleeping on the sofa as well, so just what kind of sleeper was he?

It was the third morning since I've been involved with these guys.

When I looked at the time, it was right about nine in the morning.

I would usually sleep for about fourteen hours, but due to the fact that this was someone else's house, as well, it would be a bad idea to go back to sleep.

However, the moment I tried to put strength into my body to get up, I felt a dull pain in both of my thighs. I let out a sudden "Ah....." and fell back on the sofa.

I immediately heard Kido question, "What kind of weird sounds are you making.....?" but knowing that she'd very likely be taken aback, I pretended that I hadn't heard her.

Still, it only made sense. I'd walked so much yesterday, and the day before, so of course I'd be feeling so much strain on my thin legs.

For a brief moment, I began to despair at my own helplessness, but I realized that there was no use in complaining.

It was then that I thought of this as the "mysterious price I had to pay for using power beyond my potential," just like what often happened in manga.

Yes, I had been given the exciting setting that only a main character would have. Seriously, I was a man that was just too perfect for the role of a main character. It was almost unbearable.

As I filled my head with head with the knowledge I'd accumulated from anime and manga, just as I always did, I eventually remembered the dream that I had earlier.

Ayano.

I had seen her in my dreams several times before, but in these past few days, I started to see her more frequently.

Was it because of the heat? Or was it because I was subconsciously rejecting becoming close to someone?

If I thought about it, it was also like this when Ene had come.

After she'd come into my life, I started having dreams about Ayano every night.

Once, when I'd been having a dream about her, Ene had forcefully woken me up, and we gotten into a fight over that.

It wasn't the usual casual bickering we did, but actual yelling on my part, and she also raised her voice for once..... What kind of quarrel had it been that time?

I had been considerably tired in the middle of the night, so that's probably why I can't remember much.

Anyway, I felt bad as soon as I woke up, and apologized profusely to Ene.

I clearly remember how she had bossily said, "It's no use picking on a virgin, so I'll forgive you."

This was exactly why I'd rather forget about that incident but..... Even I was amazed by how masochistic my mind was.

As I thought about these things, I suddenly heard the sound of running water from the kitchen. And after hearing the sound of the refrigerator being opened, I realized that she was making breakfast.

"Ahh, I feel kind of bad. I'll help out."

I said, and tried getting up again. To avoid putting stress on the areas that hurt earlier, I got up carefully, and didn't feel very much muscular pain.

"Hm? Shintaro, you can cook?"

Kido asked while rinsing the tableware. I wanted to answer, "Yeah, of course," but naturally, I hadn't ever tried to actually cook anything.

As for Momo, the taste of her cooking was equivalent to a deadly poison, but in terms of trying, it was true that she had more experiences than I did.

I had no such cooking skills.

"Ahh, I see. Then sit."

Kido said sharply, and continued washing the dishes.

I could gradually feel the sadness from not being needed beginning to spiral in my heart.

NEETs are fragile creature that die if they don't keep thinking they're needed by someone.

Fortunately, this room was rather comfortable because that guy had fallen back asleep in the entrance.

And on the contrary, nobody else had woken up. There was no reason for me to have to move.

I felt bad for being spoiled by the motherly demeanor that Kido had taken, but I'd continue to take it easy for a while longer.

I wondered what breakfast was going to be.

At the moment, I felt like eating a normal breakfast of bacon and eggs, or sausages.

But wait, wasn't this something unbelievable?

Staying with a girl under the same roof, spending the night, and then having her make you breakfast?

Hey hey hey, this is it. Hey, this is finally it.

.....

.....No, I should stop. Although I wanted to think of it as that, there was no way it was actually going to happen.

And if I didn't get rid of the thing nagging at my chest, I wouldn't even be able to find an appetite for breakfast.

The only ones here were Kido and I.

If I was going to ask directly, it had to be now.

Standing up, I headed for the kitchen.

There, Kido was standing in the same apron as yesterday, with her hair tied behind her, and had just started the fire for the frying pan.

"Do you have a moment?" I asked, and Kido replied without turning, "What? Didn't I tell you to sit?" while cracking an egg into the frying pan with her free hand.

I did want to keep sitting, but I couldn't have that leisure right now.

Starting out slowly, I opened my mouth.

"Yesterday, in the middle of the night, I feel like Kano came back..... Did you know?"

"Kano? No, I had no idea."

Kido replied as she began to stir the eggs.

Scrambled eggs, huh? I started to digress, but then continued talking.

“Hey, does he..... Uh, does Kano... hate me or something? Has he said anything to you?”

What happened with Kano late last night had been bothering me ever since.

He had suddenly appeared looking like Momo to deceive me, and on top of that, changed into Ayano, and then disappeared somewhere.

I was tired then, so I still thought that it had been some kind of strange dream.

In the first place, I had never talked to anyone about Ayano, so Kano shouldn't have known about her, and also, I had been huddled on the ground, but when I woke up, I was sleeping on the sofa. It just didn't seem real.

Even as I came to figure it out, it had been a creepily realistic dream.

I didn't feel comfortable talking to Kido about it, but I just wanted some confirmation that it had only been a dream.

At my question, Kido stopped moving the chopsticks, and turned to face me.

“Did he say something to you last night?”

As she said this, Kido reached behind her to turn the fire off the stove and crossed her arms while still holding the chopsticks.

Kido seemed to guess from the tone of my voice that I wasn't just asking this offhandedly, and a slightly worried expression appeared on her face.

“N-no, it's nothing like that. It might've just been a very realistic dream, anyway. And besides, it's not like he can read peoples' minds, right?”

“Yeah, Kano isn't able to do that. Anyway, Kano seems to have taken quite a liking to you, so I don't think that he'd find you disagreeable or anything.....”

Kido said this and lowered her gaze, making a sad expression.

From the looks of it, she didn't seem to be lying.

To begin with, there was no way that Kano could have an ability that even those living with him wouldn't know about, and I couldn't imagine someone as goofy as him doing things like that.

In the end, it probably was just another of those dreams that I'd been having a lot recently. Thinking that, the weight I felt on my heart quickly faded.

"Th-that's just how he is, so..... While he may be annoying and disagreeable at times, he's a good person at heart. I'd like it if you wouldn't think too badly of him....."

"Wait, no! That's not what I'm saying at all! I think I must've been tired last night and had a bad dream, that's all. And anyway, he's even been looking after my sister. I couldn't hate him or anything."

After I said this, Kido's expression brightened, and laughed a bit as she replied, "I-I see. That's good, then."

The combination of the apron, the smell of scrambled eggs, and her smile, made my heart tighten. For virgins of that level, it was feminine power enough to send one flying in an instant. She was a force to be reckoned with.

".....W-well, sorry for bothering you. Anyway, I'll leave breakfast to you. I'll take care of cleaning up afterwards."

"Yeah, leave it to me. Cooking's my specialty."



Saying this, Kido began cooking, and the consecutive attack of that quick grin thrown over her shoulder, her ponytail, and her appeal of being good at cooking was enough to stir even an elite virgin like myself, but I was somehow able to hold my ground.

For the time-being, I'd go back to the sofa, and wait for breakfast.

But really, all I had to do was try talking about it. The worries that I'd been harboring all on my own had disappeared for the most part, and I was starting to get hungry.

Until Kido finished with breakfast, I figured I'd go bother Ene since there was nothing else to do.

As I considered this, which I rarely did, I arrived at the sofa, and saw that something white and fluffy, like the chief of sheep, was lingering there.

It had my cell phone in one hand, and was desperately tapping at it with their other free hand.

".....What are you doing, Mary?"

Mary looked up in surprise and turned towards me.

Pale pink eyes, and contrasting, white clothes. Wearing pajamas with soft, fluffy frills, she really did look like a doll.

And, maybe because she had just woken up, her bulky white hair seemed even thicker than it usually was.

Whether it was because she'd grown friendly, or whether she was looking down on me, Mary no longer seemed to be cautious of me. If possible, I'd like to think it was because she considered me a friend now.

"Shintaro..... That blue girl won't come out."

Saying this, Mary began to poke at my cell phone without restraint again.

"Ene? Here, let me see it."

I took the cell phone back from Mary, but no matter how many times I pressed the power button, there was no response.

"..... Ah, come to think of it, I haven't charged it since yesterday."

Thinking back on it, I'd had this cell phone with me all day due to the huge fuss that Ene made. She must have used up all the energy, the poor thing.

Despite not having a charger on me, the fact that it'd been charged that full yesterday must be because someone here had charged it for me.

It was most likely Momo that had borrowed a charger from someone.

"D-did she die.....?"

Mary asked this fearfully, but I didn't think she would die just from running out of battery.

"Nah, I don't think she'd die from just this. As soon as it's charged, she'll be revived."

"Charged?"

"Huh? Ah, the concept is that if there isn't any electricity in here, she won't be able to move."

After I said this, Mary replied, "She eats such weird things~" with eyes shining in admiration.

Oi, what was this with pure and innocent creature. No, I couldn't. Wake up.

Quieting my evil, perverted heart with an unyielding spirit, I completely ignored Mary's behavior and asked her,

"Mary, do you know where the charger is kept? Kido and them are always charging their phones, right?"

"Um~Ah, that string-looking thing?"

Mary thought about it for a moment, and then seemed to remember. Well, a string and a charger were two rather different things, but that was probably it.

"Yeah, that thing. Could you bring it to me?"

"Okay, got it!"

Saying this, Mary stood up and headed to the cupboard behind the sofa with light footsteps.

The cupboard in question, that looked like it had come out from an old book, was cluttered with shady ceramics and old-fashioned trinkets. Just whose hobby was it to make something like this?

Going by the willful impression I had of her, I felt like it was Kido, but surprisingly, it might even be Kano that was active in these kinds of things.

As the shady-looking shelf swayed dangerously, Mary poked around the drawers while humming, “String~ String~” What was with this creature that I felt like protecting from all harm?

Sweet and innocent. Those words were perfectly suited for this girl.

Compared to the noisy tank that I had for a younger sister, she was much more like a girl should be.

.....No, I couldn't. I was being too much of a virgin. Just how indiscriminate was I?

Due to my extreme lack of interactions of girls, I was turning into the type of guy that gets worked up over the littlest things.

As an elite virgin, this was very bad.

I had to go back to having a wise heart.

And anyway, it seemed like Mary was struggling quite a bit. While earlier, she'd been cheerfully humming a song about strings, now she was grumbling under her breath.

“Heeey, if you can't find it, you don't have to keep looking for it so hard. On the contrary, if she's revived it'll be noisy, so if it's totally fine like this.....”

As I said this, Mary turned back towards me with an offended expression.

“Don't you feel bad saying something like that!?”

My shoulders shook miserably at being told this. To be intimidated by even such a small girl, I had to admit that I was very lacking in courage.

However, Mary had been jumpy when I'd first met her, but yesterday and today, she was now able to strongly say what was on her mind.

Had she opened up a bit? Thinking about it like this, it honestly wasn't that bad.

“It's lonely to be on your own. I'm sure that she feels the same way.”

Inflating her cheeks, Mary began rummaging through the drawers again.

From the looks of it, it seemed that Ene was quite in favor here. I usually wasn't one to care, but in regards to this, I didn't find it to be a bad thing, either.

In the first place, the fact that no one had really been that surprised after seeing Ene—that in itself had been particularly strange.

Normal people would've asked, "How is she moving?" or "Who's that talking?"

I'm sure that's how I would react, too, if I were to suddenly see Ene.

However, considering how they were plenty mysterious themselves but didn't go as far as emphasizing that, they were rather friendly.

Thinking of it like that, I felt like the situation now was one to be thankful for.

"Good for you."

I muttered quietly, and stroked my finger over the screen of the powerless phone.

I didn't know where it'd come from, but I'd come to develop affectionate feelings over Ene.

I may have been greatly saved by her appearing to me in that room where I'd been all alone.

In a way, meeting these guys like this, and opening up to them, was all thanks to her.

"Shintaro, I found it! The charger! Wait just a bit, it's in the back....."

Looking up, I saw that Mary had her hand reached into the back of the drawer, and looked like she was about to pull out the charger that she had found.

Due to the swaying of the shelf, the lined-up collection of trinkets all wobbled with clattering noises.

"H-hey, be careful, Mary. Take it slowly."

"Mm. It's okay, it's okay..... Got it."

Saying this, Mary pulled on her hand, and there she held a charger cable.

I wouldn't know what I'd do if it really turned out to just be a plain old string, but it turned out the string that Mary had spoken of had been the right one.

“Ohh! Yeah, that’s it. Thanks.”

As soon as I said with, Mary giggled in embarrassment with an, “Ehehe.”

Ugh, she was so cute.

Just as Mary turned to bring it to me, Kido came out of the kitchen holding the breakfast dishes.

“Breakfast is ready~ Hm? Ohh, Mary, you’re awake. Good job waking up on your own.”

“Yeah! Ah, Shintaro praised me, too. I found the charger for him.”

Mary happily held out the charger to me, and at the tip of the cord, which had been blocked from view by the sofa earlier, there was some kind of belt-like thing tangled around it.

I didn’t know what that was at first, but once I realized, I flinched.

At the same time, Kido let out a small squeak, but in the moment I turned to look up at Mary, Kido had quickly disappeared.

“Huh? What is this? It got stuck.”

Mary said this, picked up the belt-thing and began staring at it intently.

“I-isn’t that the shed skin from a snake!? Why is something like that in there!?”

“Huh, why..... I wonder why. I think Kano brought it back from somewhere ah, uwaah! Kido, what’s wrong? Are you crying?”

Mary suddenly turned towards thin air and began talking. I see. So Mary was still able to see Kido.

Kido’s “eye concealing” ability was a convenient power that allowed her to lower the limits of others’ perception of her at will.

However, the condition was that at the moment she disappeared, the ones she was using her ability on had to be looking away from her. Mary, who had not averted her eyes from Kido, seemed like she was able to see her just as before.

“S-sorry, Kido, are you okay.....? Does your stomach hurt?”

Still holding onto the snake skin calmly, Mary worried over Kido.

Being unable to detect Kido even now, I wasn't easily able to figure about what the situation was like.

"M-Mary, isn't it probably because Kido doesn't like that shed skin or something?"

"This? Hmm, Kido, is that so?I see. Okay. I'll put it away."

Mary went back to the cupboard again, and hid the snake skin behind a large model of a three-wheeled automobile.

Kido must have told her to do so. Mary didn't seem to get it, and merely muttered quietly, "Weird."

"Hey, Kido, are you alright?"

I called out to the empty air, but there was no reply. She probably didn't want to be seen shaking with teary ears.

After putting away the snake skin, Mary returned to my side and relayed to me, "She says, just a little longer."

Just like at the haunted mansion yesterday, Kido was such a coward that it made me wonder why she was the leader.

I was sure that I was also quite the coward, but Kido was probably on a higher level than me. Like some high-spec coward.

But it couldn't be helped, so for now, I took the charger from Mary and began charging my cell phone while waiting for Kido's return.

After sitting with Mary for a few minutes, Kido appeared out of thin air.

It must be because of her power that her eyes were somewhat red.

"S-sorry for the wait. Let's go eat breakfast."

Despite Kido's awkward attempt at a smile as she said this, I felt like the damage had already been done, but since I'd feel bad for bring it up, I merely replied with, "Yeah, let's eat."

After several trips back and forth, the breakfast menu had been finally been assembled on the table.

There were scrambled eggs, grilled salmon, toasted nori, and natto—a variety of things that made up this perfect, full course breakfast.

“This is so normal it’s almost godly.....”

“Hm? We always eat things like this.”

Kido said as she served the rice from the cooker that was placed on the side table.

In this kind of hideout, those members ate this kind of ordinary breakfast every day?

It was weird just thinking of that mental image.

I started thinking about how I would have preferred a Western-style breakfast, but the scent of Kido’s special miso soup stirred my appetite in a way which blew away that small complaint.

I was seized by the impulse to start eating as soon as possible, but then I noticed that there were only four rice bowls set out.

It was only enough for the four people that were currently in this room. There weren’t any for Seto, Momo, and Hibiya, who had yet to appear in the living room.

“Huh. Is it alright not waking up the others? I’d feel bad for starting breakfast without them just because they’re still asleep.....”

“Ahh, you mean Momo and them? They’ve already gone out.”

As she said this, Kido put down the rice bowl, reached into her pocket for a piece of paper that was folded in two, and handed it to me.

Wondering what it was, I opened the paper, and saw things that resembling hieroglyphs that might be inscribed into a mural somewhere.

I thought it was some kind of code at first, but after seeing the signature at the very bottom read “Momo,” I realized that this eerie message had been produced by my sister’s hand.

“Her writing is so messy.....”

As if on cue, Kido followed up with, “I agree that it looks pretty bad, but..... Let’s just interpret it artistically.”

After realizing that it was Momo’s writing, I was able to read it surprisingly fast.

It roughly said something like, “I’m going out to look for a girl named Hiyori with Hibiya-kun. We’ll contact you if anything comes up, but we should be back for dinner.”

“Is Hiyori the girl that Hibiya mentioned? Anyway, they went out pretty early to go look.....”

“They slept early yesterday just for this. And also, Seto, who’d been taking care of Hibiya, went out too, so he probably couldn’t be left alone.”

Kido explained, and then stood up to walk towards the entrance. I expected that she was going to do something about that guy who was still lazing about.

“Hey, how long as you going to keep sleeping for? Wake up.”

“Yeah..... Yeah, that’s fine.....”

Judging by Konoha’s loose and groggy way of replying, it was the typical behavior of someone that was terrible at dealing with mornings.

Rather than not waking up at all, it was the ones that talked nonsense while still asleep that were much worse.

I felt like this was going to be a pain, but when I looked towards the entrance, Kido simply said, “It’s time to eat,” waking Konoha up immediately.

“Good morning.”

“Yeah, good morning. Come on, sit down. We’re eating now.”

Saying this, Kido came back with Konoha. Kido and Mary sat down beside each other, while Konoha sat down beside me.

“Seto isn’t here either, huh?”

“Seems like he’s at his part-time job. I got a text from him.”

“So that means this is everyone, right?”

“Yeah, that’s about right.”

I was already at my limits with suppressing my rumbling stomach. Picking up the chopsticks, I clasped my hands together.

“Thank you for the meal!”

The four of us all said this at the same time, and then each began to eat in their own respective ways. As for Konoha, despite having just woken up, he was bolting down his rice at a tremendous pace.

Even though they were simple dishes like fish, egg, and miso soup, the reason they didn't taste bland must have been because of Kido's cooking skill.

The way she subtly used seasoning was just like her in every way.

"Would it be alright to ask for seconds?"

Konoha said as he held out his rice bowl to Kido. There wasn't a single grain of rice remaining in the bowl.

I couldn't believe my eyes, due to the fact that not even a minute had passed since we'd started breakfast. Just what kind of digestive system did this guy have?

"Oh, yeah, of course. Eat as much as you like."

Kido seemed happy to take the rice bowl from him and pile it with nearly twice the amount as before.

"Here. Is this enough for you?"

Kido laughed daringly as she passed the full bowl back to Konoha.

In front of such a large serving of rice, even Konoha, who was usually so expressionless, made a fascinated face. It looked like a scene out of a shoujo manga.

Well, even though it was usually very noisy, it wasn't so bad eating breakfast with a lot of people like this.

The healthy menu may have been part of it, but it was a very pleasant morning.

As I thought of this while sipping my miso soup, I noticed that Mary was peeling off the skin of her salmon.

It was true that you didn't normally eat that part, but..... Ah, but Momo always ate all of it. In that case, you wouldn't normally eat it then.

Anyway, she was being awfully careful about peeling it off.

Since she was taking so much care to peel it, I found myself watching over her, wondering what she could be doing. When she had finally peeled it off cleanly, Mary proudly put the skin on her chopsticks and extended it towards me.

"Shintato, look! It's like the snake skin from earlier."

At Mary's sudden remark, Kido, who had been stuffing herself with rice, let out a kind of anguished moan.

Compared to the terrible experience from earlier, something like this was bearable, but Mary didn't seem to mean any harm.

"H-hey, Mary. You shouldn't really do that sort of thing during mealtime....."

I didn't know what I should say, but for the time-being, I tried to gently encourage her to stop, and Kido nodded vigorously in agreement.

"Uu~ But I did so well in taking it off."

Saying this, Mary returned the salmon skin to the plate, put down her chopsticks, and lowered her head, looking depressed.

Come to think of it, reptiles seemed like something that would make someone faint just from the sight, but this girl seemed to be rather brave around them.

Even if it was because she was childish, it shouldn't be something that girls would be particularly good around..... Ah, but Momo had said something like, "Can I keep a chameleon as a pet?" before. In that case, normal girls wouldn't be good around them.

"Mary seems completely fine with that kind of thing, huh. Even though she's a girl."

I said, and Kido muttered while mixing the natto, "Well, she'd have to be."

"Before coming here, Mary lived by herself in the mountains. That'd be hard to pull off if snakes scared her."

Kido said that as if it wasn't particularly strange, but as expected, I was taken aback.

"Mary on a mountain by herself!? What's with that? What about her parents....."

The moment I said this, Mary's shoulders shook, and she made fists on top of her lap.

Was it something that I shouldn't have brought up? It seemed my mouth had run off and said something careless.

Just as I started to feel regret building up in my chest and was about to apologize, Mary began to speak slowly.

“When I was little, my father died, and from then on, it was just my mother and I. But when I ignored my mother’s warnings and went outside, there were some scary people, and I think they took my mother away somewhere.”

“Wh-what do you mean by that.....?”

“Um, my father is different, but for my mother and I, we’ve had red eyes since birth, and she said that we’re Medusa that appear in picture books. She also said that the people outside were scared of us, since we’re different from them. That’s why she said I wasn’t allowed to go outside, but I still.....”

Mary’s story made the room fall into silence. Even Konoha, who had been eating at such a vigorous pace, stopped to listen to what Mary was saying.

Was that what Kido had meant by her living on her own?

After listening to her story, it sounded like Mary’s family had faced from kind of oppression from the people around them.

Maybe that was why they had been called “Medusa.”

When I’d asked Kido about it, she’d explained that Mary had the ability to temporarily stop the movement of people that she made eye contact with.

It was hardly a power that a normal human would have, and if that was known to the masses, I understood how they’d be afraid of her.

“Mary..... This is the first time you’ve really talked about this, isn’t it?”

The one who said this was Kido.

It would seem that I wasn’t the only one that was shocked to hear Mary’s story.

“Y-yeah. I have more friends now, so I guess I feel safer. I don’t feel scared to talk about it anymore.”

Mary said this and smiled faintly.

I see. I’d heard that Mary hadn’t been here very long, but from the look of things, it didn’t seem like she’d talked about herself all that much until now.



“I see. Anyway, about your mother, there wasn’t..... a missing persons report for her, was there? Dammit.....”

Kido said, an angry expression appearing on her face. She must have been thinking of the same thing as me.

Going by the mention of red eyes, Mary’s mother must have also been the holder of some kind of ability.

The fact that she’d been abducted when Mary had gone outside, and the fact that Mary was here right now, was because she had protected her from the people that were outside. In other words, it was reasonable to think that she had become a replacement.

The troubling part was, it was another thing if she’d been killed, but because of the fact that she’d been taken away, it had to be considered that it hadn’t just been an act of defense.

Unusual things tend to pique people’s curiosity.

It might just be an unjustified suspicion, but this could mean that Mary’s mother had been taken by those foul-minded human to gain some kind of profit.

Thinking of it like that, I felt disgust stir in the back of my gut.

Mary’s family had tried to protect their own happiness, and had lived with just the two of them together.

Although they should have been helped in this situation, their happiness had instead been taken away; it was unforgivable.

“How could they do something so terrible.....”

Those words I said were exactly how I felt at the time.

No matter how much I thought, I just couldn’t wrap my head around it. Before coming here, Mary had lived all by herself, unable to rely on anyone.

The words that Mary had said earlier when thinking about Ene: “It’s lonely to be on your own.” Just how much meaning had they actually held?

The feelings that had nowhere to go tightened in my chest.

Even as I tried thinking about what I could possibly do to help, I could only feel like I was being crushed by my powerlessness.

“Do you remember what the people that took her looked like? Even just one distinguishing feature would help.”

“..... I can't really remember. It was so long ago, and since I'd been beaten up and was almost unconscious, I couldn't see their faces very well. And when I came to again, both my mother and those people were gone.....”

Mary said this, with a troubled, regretful face. If she had been subjected to violence, and it had been something that had happened when she'd been very young, it was understandable how she didn't remember much of the details.

“I see..... Do you remember how many years ago it was, at least?”

“Umm..... I've counted over one hundred summers, so I think it was probably a hundred years ago. I forgot to count after that, so it might be even more.....”

Mary answered with a nod after recalling.

I see, if it was as long as a hundred years ago, it was no wonder it was difficult to remember. If it'd only been a few years ago, then.....

“A hundred years!?”

Kido and I exclaimed this at the exact same time.

A hundred years?

No, that couldn't be possible.

If the girl before us said that she was one hundred years old, one hundred out of one hundred people would just laugh, “That's cute.”

At our sudden outburst, Mary cried out, “Eek! I'm sorry!” with a jolt of her shoulders.

“Y-you're kidding, right? In no way do you look like you're a hundred.....”

“I-it’s true! I was taught how to count! Ah, but whenever I asked my mother how old I was, she got mad at me and told me not to talk about it, so she never told me my age, though.....”

Although Mary insisted this very indignantly, it wasn’t something that was so easy to believe.

However, the fact that I couldn’t easily deny it either, was probably due to the fact that an invisible person was right before my eyes.

Kido began to scratch her head. “Even with that kind of ability.....”

The ability to live over a hundred years. Was Mary’s power “immortality”?

No, that was ridiculous.

There was no way a power like that existed.

I suddenly remembered the story that Kido had told yesterday about how she’d gotten her power.

Kano, Seto, and Momo had all also awoken with one after a near-death experience.

Looking at what Hibiya had gone through yesterday, it was probably the same for him, as well.

However, Mary was the only one that had her ability from birth. It was clear that the way she’d acquired her ability was different from the others.

“Hey, Mary. Have you always had that ability since you were born?”

“Eh? Yes, that’s right. When I was young, my mother always told me that I wasn’t allowed to use it, though.”

All of this was too mysterious.

I had somehow figured out how abilities were acquired from yesterday’s conversation, but because Mary was the only one that was so different, I felt deeply confused.

She had an ability from the start, without having to go to “that world.”

And her mother had also been an ability holder.

A Medusa that lived for a hundred years.....

It was an incredibly fantasy-like story, but there were countless mysterious just like it in this world.

Along with Kido's incident, I couldn't help but think that all these mysterious phenomena had to do with "something" that exceeded the hundred year gap.

If that were the case, we could come one huge step towards the real answer by solving Mary's story.

However, even if we were to look for Mary's mother, it would be useless to try and tell the police something like, "We're looking for this girl's mother, who went missing a hundred years ago."

And even if we were to rely on Mary's memory, there were too many unclear parts. What could we do?

"Um..... I have an idea."

While I'd been pondering endlessly to myself, Konoha suddenly raised his hand a little.

"Uh, sure. What is it?"

Kido seemed slightly surprised to hear that coming from someone so unexpected.

With his usual unreadable expression, Konoha slowly began to give his opinion.

"It might not be anything important, but can't we try going to her house?"

"Eh?"

Both Kido and I widened our eyes.

"Ah, I said, can't we try going to her house? Ah, when I say her house, I don't mean here, but where she used to live, umm, I mean....."

"That's it!"

As if to cut off Konoha, who had started to ramble without getting to the point, Kido and I spoke at the exact same time again.

If we thought about it, this was true.

If Mary's mother had called themselves "Medusa," that meant that she must have had some awareness of their abilities.

Even if we weren't able to find any answers, we might be able to at least find some information about these abilities in Mary's house.

"That seems like a good idea. What do you think, Shintaro?"

"I feel like this has to be the only way, actually. We might be able to find the answer to this chain of events."

After I said this, Konoha gasped slightly, "D-does that mean it could lead to a way to save Hiyori?"

"I can't guarantee anything, but..... We might come across some kind of hint, at least."

Hearing this, Konoha's face became clearly determined.

Come to think of it, he'd been told off pretty harshly by Hibiya yesterday.

Hibiya had said that he hadn't been able to save a girl named Hiyori, but with how Konoha didn't show it on his face, he seemed to feel strongly about it.

"If we're going, then let's head out. Mary, are you alright with us taking a look around your house?"

Kido said as she stood up.

"If it's with everyone, it's no problem at all," Mary replied with a smile.

"Alright. With that settled then, we should clean up. I feel bad that Kido did all the work, so I'll....."

I said this and started to get up, but I had completely forgotten about the muscle pain in my legs.

I moved in a crouched position to prevent the pain from getting any worse.

Kido seemed to notice this and smirked.

"Alright then, I'll go get ready. I'm counting on you, Shintaro," She said, and left for her room.

Wait a minute.

We'd come to this plan impulsively, but I'd forgotten something very important.

That small worry soon turned into a very grave realization.

"H-hey, Mary. Where did you say your house was again.....?"

I asked this very slowly, and Mary answered happily, "It's in the back of a forest a little ways from here! If we walk from the station, I think it's about two hours away?"

Hearing this, I collapsed onto the floor.

Two hours!?

Oh no, no, no, that was crazy.

On top of not having any stamina, how much was I expected to walk for so many consecutive days?

Cancel.

Yeah, we had to cancel it.

I'd tell Kido right away, and.....

"Looks like we're going out today, too! I'm counting on you, Shintaro. Ah, she's coming too, right? I can't wait!"

Mary said this with a wide grin.

There wasn't anyone in the world that could say they wanted to cancel now after seeing that smile.

"Y-yeah, me too....."

I said this with a pained expression, and for the time being, sat down on the sofa.

After hearing Mary say so, I remembered that I'd been charging my cell phone.

When I removed the charger from my phone that had been placed by the sofa, I saw that it was nearly fully charged. However, I soon realized something strange.

“.....Huh?”

I couldn't see Ene anywhere on the screen.

I tried shaking the phone and calling out to her, but she still didn't appear.

Maybe she'd gone into Momo's phone.

When my computer had fallen onto the floor before, she hadn't disappeared back then, so there was no way she would disappear just because of the battery running out.

I convinced myself of that, and stuffed the phone into my pocket.

Sighing, I looked at the table in front of me.

Anyway, first I had to clean this up, and then the next main thing on today's agenda would be hiking, huh? I had a lot of worries about what was to come, but complaining about it wouldn't do any good.

Even so, the events of these past few days were like some kind of plot to shape me into a decent human being.

No, but seriously, what if this really was all someone's doing?

Someone that had the power to manipulate fate.....

As I thought about that, I couldn't help grinning.

If I hadn't experienced it myself, I would've just laughed it off; there was no way such a wild story could be true.

But, I was here right now because I had a secret passion to figure out this situation.

For someone's sake.

Maybe it was some kind of atonement.

Even so, if there was something that I could do right now, then I had to try taking that step forward.

As I thought of these things, I began to clean up the fully-eaten breakfast dishes.

Shinigami Record II

“Did you not hear me? If you won’t let me in, then call that man.”

People were slowly gathering around the aging, brick front gate to watch the commotion.

The vulgar buzzing in the air that arose whenever people crowd together—as usual, I hated it.

Even from the windows of the stately mansion behind it, several people, who I supposed were servants, were looking down at us.

“No, but you see, young lady. With how sudden this all is, I can’t just go along with it so easily.”

The seedy-looking man in front of me, that looked to be a part of society in appearances only, was laughing lightly and clearly making a fool of me.

“Then what am I to do? Do you understand? I’ve been through Hell because of him. I was told that he knew about what I am, and therefore quietly complied, but in the end, I was handed over to some suspicious people and was treated horribly—I was even *shot*.”

What was wrong with this man?

His halfhearted behavior was irritating me.

In the first place, why was I to be treated this way after following the tracks of the carriage on foot for weeks to return here?

“Ahahah. You know, young lady... If you were really shot, then you wouldn’t be here right now, would you?”

“Hm? And what nonsense are you speaking? Can’t you see that I am presently standing right here?”

As soon as I said this, the seedy-looking man took a deep breath and roared with laughter. As if on cue, I started to hear chuckles from within the crowd, as well.

The flames of frustration had at last begun raging in my heart.

Why did so many of these creatures intend to grate on my nerves?

I considered leaving as quickly as possible, but that would mean that everything would go to waste.

Until I heard what that stout man knew about me, I would not be able to rest.

“Oi, if you’re going to continue on like this, then I’ll simply let myself in. In the first place, what are you to me? I hardly have any reason to be speaking to.....”

Just when I was prepared to ignore him and force myself into the mansion, I noticed that the man in question was staring at me from the second floor window of that mansion.

He seemed to be quite afraid to see that I had returned.

The face that I saw peering from that window was colored with shades of fear.

Despite the fact that he’d noticed that I was here, that man was pretending to be distracted by the commotion; my anger had finally reached a boiling point.

“That man.....!”

I lunged forward to grip the bars of the iron fence, and the seedy-looking man yelled after me, “Cut it out! If you don’t, I’ll feel sorry for making a big deal out of this!”

“.....Are you honestly still not taking me seriously?”

My anger had reached its limits long ago.

At this point, I could not possibly be stopped by the words coming from his mouth.

However, the man showed not the slightest intent of stopping me himself, either.

In front of the gates, there was already a huge crowd of people, and from within it, several men armed with iron swords appeared.

“I didn’t want to do this. But since you just wouldn’t listen, this is how it’s going to be, young lady. Come now, just give..... ack.....!”

I see. So this was how it was going to be. They really were rotten.

The moment I glared at the man, both of my eyes started to twinge with a pulsing heat.

His eyes, which met with mine, twitched for a few seconds before stopping completely, and immediately after that, his body quietly stopped moving as well.

I then turned towards the crowd.

All of them wore blank expressions, as if they didn't understand what kind of situation they were in right now.

"Hey, what did you do to him?"

One of the men drew his sword, and slowly approached me.

"Sword"

Something that humans had created to kill.

When used by those who wielded it, flesh was split open, and bones were shattered.

Ever since I had come to be, I had come to learn that, most painfully.

I had too learned how this world had already become their massive habitat, and what foolish creatures they were.

"If you do not answer, then that will be taken as intent of rebellion and you will be purged!"

Ahh, this was really so tiring. Why did I continue to hold any expectations from them?

I closed my eyes, my vision filling with darkness.

When had I last used this?

Hadn't the last time been when I had been revered as some "god" in a church somewhere? In the end, I hadn't gained anything then, either.

No, that wasn't it.

The only things I ever received from their creatures was always contempt and disappointment.

That being so, I was once again met with worthless disappointment.

When I opened my eyes, I saw the man brandishing his sword.

Did he intend to take my life? It was always this way with them.

“Captivate the eyes...”

The moment I whispered this, the men suddenly stopped moving.

At the same time, the chatter of the crowd behind them also ceased immediately.

Naturally, this was because everyone here right now was “meeting” my eyes.

What I saw before me were human faces that were all painted with fear. Pathetic, foolish, and beyond saving.

“What in the world is she?”

The thoughts of the man brandishing the sword flooded into my mind.

It was troublesome that “stealing” was the only one that I still could not control.

After all, the more I peered into humans' thoughts, the more uncomfortable I felt.

If I was able to skillfully see inside the minds of all these people, it might have been something very convenient.

I would be able to easily distinguish whether one of them was lying or not.

However, their heads were filled with nothing but useless thoughts.

It was practically impossible to read only what I wanted to know.

Like searching for a tiny pebble in a vast sea of garbage.

I asked the motionless man, “Should I call all of you monsters?” However, I received no reply.

Silence.

In the end, it was always this silence.

Freezing cold, like from back then. Even now, I hated this silence.

Turning to the mansion, I saw that the man who had been looking out of the window had disappeared.

Had he escaped somewhere?

If I hurried to catch up to him, I might be able to have a word or two, but I was no longer in the mood for that.

How long was I to continue doing this?

It was like silently advancing through an endless darkness, knowing that light does not exist.

Yes, I knew this. I knew this, and yet still, I kept on going.



“There is no one in this world who knows me.”

Every time I thought of this, tears would spill from my eyes.

“I hate this.”

Word without reason, such as those, would fill my head.

That was why I had no choice but to move forward.

If not, I would be crushed by my thoughts, and feel as if I would disappear.

However, I could not.

I had experienced death many times, but could never disappear completely.

The motionless man before me was no longer thinking of anything.

He was silently and simply, there.

It would be so much easier to be like him.

Without thinking, an existence that was simply *there*.

Before I knew, tears were falling from my eyes.

Unable to stop them, it soon became difficult to even breath.

“Uu.....Aah, ah.....!”

If there exists such a being that gave birth to me, hurry and show yourself already.

And please, just end me.

As I prayed for this, I continued to cry until it became dark.

*

The summer breeze made the trees sway, and the singing of small birds echoed in the fresh greenery.

Due to the rainfall last night, it was very difficult to travel by the roads.

My feet sunk into the dirt road with every step, and I was unable to advance as I had thought.

Although the overgrown trees softened the strong sunlight greatly, interestingly enough, it was the heat that enveloped my body sapped me of my strength.

I had acquired my own body, and though I had realized so by coming across various other creatures, I was overwhelming lacking in physical strength.

I would start sweating after walking only a short distance, and the joints of my body would cry out when I tried to walk uphill.

Even now, I was sweating, and my legs felt like they were on the verge of collapse.

Because I had already come this far, tears had started to form in my eyes due to how hard it was to keep moving my legs.

Although it was true that it was hard, I would also cry because of the pain, so it was an inevitable thing.

“It should be only a little further.....”

The fact that I had been using “captivation” since a while ago may also be one reason that my strength was leaving so quickly.

However, because this was my way of marking the way, I had to continue using it.

At the very least, it seemed like I was making progress, and in every moment, I attracted the attention of the surrounding creatures.

“Captivation” was a convenient power.

I was able to clearly discern where anyone was focusing their attention, and I could also force their attention to be directed towards me.

In other words, by using this power, I could actually figure out the place that drew the least attention from others. I found it rather clever to use this power in such a way.

Yes. After I had been betrayed by humans for the last time on that day, I had decided to spend the rest of my life in a place where none would find me.

At first, I had considered living in a cave, but frankly, I was tired of the darkness.

I had searched for other suitable places, but I was extremely outraged to find that most quiet places were in dark places.

I had had enough of the dark. Living in it was the last thing I wanted.

However, I knew that in this world trampled upon by humans, it was near impossible to live completely alone in bright places.

After considering several other possibilities, I had settled on this.

Though “focusing,” I had found the most unnoticed place in this world.

And surprisingly, it was in this rather bright forest.

Frankly, I had been skeptical become coming here, but as I headed towards that place, I noticed that the signs of other creatures were slowly diminishing.

It was strange, almost as if a gaping hole had opened in that place alone, and no one could focus their attention to it.

I had still yet to arrive there, but I was already feeling rather elated merely because of this proven fact.

To be frank, I had boarded a ship to cross the ocean, but on the way, a quarrel had arisen, leading me to leave the boat and swimming the rest of the way while crying.

I lost track of how many times I drowned. If this place had been swarmed with humans after enduring so much suffering, I’m certain that I could have reduced this forest to burnt ruins.

As I continued onwards, just as the road finally vanished, and I could no longer hear even the singing of birds, I sighted a somewhat open spot up ahead.

What kind of place was it? I wondered.

I picked up my pace, and the ambience of the space I stepped into took my breath away.

It was as if this space had continued to exist long after everyone in this world had forgotten about it.

Creatures that were still aware avoided it; a place that no one noticed.

“It’s perfect.....!”

For the first time in a while, I felt my heart beat faster. It was much quieter, brighter, and much more comfortable than I had imagined.

From the looks of it, there was just enough room for one house. I was starting to like the cozy feel of this place increasingly more.

Pushing apart the short but thickly-grown grass, I tried standing in the center of the place. It was completely different from cold silence, but a comfortable tranquility that soothed my ears.

“It is decided. From today onward, I will stay here.”

Come to think of it, I had never settled anywhere since attaining this body.

Well, because I had been wandering aimlessly here and there, it was only obvious.

Still, I wanted a house. If I was to continue to stay here, even if I were sacrifice luxury, I would need a roof, at the very least.

Whenever I was wet from the rain, my body would become cold, and I would shiver. I disliked that sensation immensely.

“A roof, hm?I won’t be able to build a house entirely on my own, but if it only a roof....”

Just then, I spotted a nearby rock that seemed comfortable enough to sit on, and doing so, I started to think about my next course of action.

Since I was to live on my own, it would not need to be particularly large, but I would need something that could defend against the wind, rain, and also sunlight.

The first priority would have to be defense against the sunlight. No matter how many times I struggled against heat, it was a formidable adversary. A succession of defeats.

In that case, I would need a considerable amount of material. Would I carry it? No, impossible. It would be too much work. However, I hated both the heat and the cold.

As I considered one thing after another, I suddenly noticed that the temperature had dropped considerably.

It had become fully night without my notice.

Whenever I did any kind of thinking, I would lose track of time.

A habit that I was unable to break since long ago.

I would become so focused on something that several days would pass before I came back to my senses.

The way in which time passed for everyone besides me, made me feel as if I was the only one that was set apart from the world, a feeling that I did not like very much at all.

But, at least the world wouldn't change completely once I finished thinking, as it once did.

Still, worrying about a house forever would get me nowhere.

It was something I wanted to avoid, if possible, but in the end, nothing would happen if I didn't take action.

"Does this mean that I have no choice but to do it?"

"Do'? Do what?"

Build a house, obviously.

Even if it wasn't anything very elegant, if it was at least somewhat comfortable.....

That was as far as I went with my thoughts, when I suddenly fell off the rock.

Looking up in a panic, I saw that a white-haired boy was suddenly standing right beside the rock that I had been sitting on. He looked to be as old as a sixteen-year-old human boy.

Although they appeared slightly soiled, his clothes looked to be personally made. A soldier or something of the sort?

However, none of that mattered.

More than anything right now, I was furious that this boy had stomped into my new place, and as a result, startled me, and on top of it all, seen me make a complete fool out of myself. My blood was boiling with anger.

"You..... I hope you've prepared yourself."

I stood up and faced the boy, threatening him as I cracked my knuckles.

Naturally, I had absolutely no intention of actually acting on it. I was physically defenseless even when up against human infants.

“Ah, did I startle you? Sorry, sorry. You seemed so deep in thought, but then you suddenly started talking to yourself, so I was just so amused.....”

My clenched fists shook at the careless boy’s attitude. Of course, I had no intention of using these fists, either.

“And what is so amusing!? Don’t mess with me! I am in the middle of making my place right now! Hurry and go somewhere else!”

I shouted in such an angered voice, but still, the boy’s smile did not falter.

“I see, I see. Your place, huh? Is there anything I could help with? If you don’t mind, I can lend you a hand!”

What in the world was he saying?

Hadn’t I told him to go somewhere else?

No, I had told him, without a doubt. I had meant to sound as hostile as possible.

But despite that, what was with this frivolous behavior of his? I couldn’t understand it.

“Don’t say something so ridiculous. At any rate, you’re probably only plotting something sinister. Enough. Disappear already.”

There had been thousands before who had similarly offered to help me until now, but in the end, they had all only tried to use me.

He was sure to be the same. Who could possibly trust people like them?

“What!? No, that isn’t true at all! I did think how nice it’d be if I could stare at you from up close, but something so shameful, and so sudden.....”

Saying this, the boy scratched his head in embarrassment.

What was wrong with him? Had he finally lost his mind?

His words were much too clumsy to fool me. Or was this how he intended to lower my guard?

Also, what did he mean by wanting to stare at me?

Well, no matter what it meant, he was most likely the same as all the other humans I had encountered until now, always with their dubious speech.

“I can’t trust you. I have been deceived like this too many times in the past. It would be more foolish if I were to believe you.”

“Oh..... Then how can I get you to trust me? If I can be of any use to you, I’ll do anything. I won’t ask for anything in return. From this moment on, I’m willing to listen to anything you say.”

The boy said this and breathed a puff of air from his nose.

I considered telling him, “Then disappear right now,” but seeing the opportunity, a good idea came to me.

It was rather wicked way of thinking, but if this went well, I could get rid of him quickly.

“...‘Anything,’ you said?” I muttered quietly.

“Huh!? O-of course! Have you decided to trust me!?”

I moved past the smiling boy, and after walking to a specific spot, I pointed at the ground.

“What is it? Why are you pointing at the ground.....?”

“Build a house here.”

The boy had gone stiff at hearing my words, still smiling. And remaining in that pose, he began to tremble and break out in cold sweat.

“Did you not hear me? Build a house here.”

I was certain that he had heard me, but I repeated myself anyway.

“I’ll do it!”

“And immediately after building it, disappear. If you cannot, then.....”

“I said I’ll do it!”

Well, it was clear that it wasn’t something that one person could do. As soon as he disappeared, I could steadily.....

“.....Hm?”

“You didn’t hear me? I’ll build a house for you! If it’s for you, something like this is nothing at all!”

The boy said this and grinned.

Although his expression was a smiling one, I could see that he was still trembling and sweaty, making it clear that he was straining himself.

It would seem that he really was insane.

Building a house with only one person? How much material and effort did he think that required?

Did he even realize this? And even if he did, I still could not make sense of his conduct.

.....No, perhaps he was still plotting something despite what he was saying?

Suspicious, I stared intently at the boy, and he suddenly became embarrassed, cheeks reddening as he scratched his head.

Whenever he became embarrassed, he would scratch his head with his right hand. Once again, more useless information.

“.....Fine then. If you think you can do it, then do so. I will be monitoring you the entire time.”

I said sarcastically. If he tried to pull anything, it would be difficult to do so with me keeping watch.

He was sure to give up halfway, and it would be amusing to see him run away with his tail between his legs.

“W-will you really watch.....?”

The boy said this with an incredibly happy face.

Frankly, I was growing sick of his frequent, nonsense behavior.

I couldn't understand it. I considered peering into his mind, but I didn't feel like looking into the mind of such a creepy person.

"Alright, then I'll do my best starting tomorrow!Umm, hey, what's your name?"

"Name? I have no such thing."

"Names"

It was something like a sign, which humans used to refer to each other.

When a human child is born, its parents give it a meaningful name, and they are called that for the rest of their life.

However, this was something used among humans, and had nothing to do with me.

"I see, so you have no name..... Just me then, I guess. I'm Tsukihiko. Nice to meet you!"



Tsukihiko, hm?

What a genuine fool. Even with a name, to me, humans were simply humans.

Nothing more and nothing less. What did he expect to gain from telling me his name?

As I thought this, it didn't appear that this boy before me expecting anything from me.

He truly was a creepy one.

However, to leave my impression of him at "creepy" and "difficult to understand" would be an annoyance.

Very well. I would attempt to grasp what meanings lay inside his heart.

"You had better not run away, *human*."

As I said this, Tsukihiko's eyes shone brightly, and he replied, "Of course!"

Childred Record IV

It was Hell.

There were several reasons why, but that was the only way that I could describe this journey.

"Shintaro, how long are you going to keep lying there like that?"

While drinking the sports drink that she had bought on the way, Kido said this to me, who had collapsed right underfoot.

"Give me a break..... I'm dying"

The fresh, summer fragrance of the grass carpet I was lying on reached to the very back of my nostrils.

The shade from the trees also helped attribute to the charm that I felt.

“The smell of grass is terrible.....”

“I don’t want to hear that from someone who stinks of puke. In the first place, it’s because you drank way too much soda to ‘prevent heat stroke’ that it’s turned out like this.”

The fresh wound in my heart throbbed painfully at Kido’s sharp comeback.

Despite being told this, for someone that loved soda, it was a necessity in my life. It was obvious that I relied on it being my main water supply.

Although, I had thrown all of it up in some random bush earlier.

“D-don’t say that! Be a little more sensitive!”

“Hmph, my bad. Anyway, I’ve been off guard since I’d come here before, but it seems like we’ve used up a lot of time.”

It had taken us about an hour to get here by a train from the hideout’s nearest station.

After that, we’d waked for two and a half hours. It’d been a tremendously harsh journey, enough to kill a NEET.

So of course I would throw up one or two times.

There was nothing wrong with me or my soda. It was summer’s fault.

Well, even if it was summer’s fault.....

“Hey, Kido. I know that these are borrowed, but weren’t there any hiking clothes that were a little more attractive than this?”

I said while pointing to the hiking clothes that I was wearing.

“You’re the one that said you didn’t want to get your jersey dirty. I don’t know any clothes that would be more appropriate for hiking than those.”

Kido replied, and sat down next to my outstretched right hand.

But even so, how could you wear something this thick in the middle of summer?

At the very least, some thinner clothing would’ve been.....

As I thought of this however, I remembered that these clothes were the choice of someone that was still wearing a long-sleeved parka as usual, so it'd be useless no matter I said.

"..... Anyway, Mary sure lived in a crazy place. There's practically nothing here. What did she do about food?"

"I thought the same thing, and tried asking her about it, but..... No, it can't be."

Kido said this, and held her head in her hand. I could easily guess that she had received some unbelievable answer in response.

"Then, do you mean that....."

"Yeah, it seems like she didn't eat. She did drink, though. But when we first brought her back to the hideout, I remember her being surprised at the most common foods....."

Mary had at last become a complete mystery. She hadn't eaten anything in a place like this, and had lived for over a hundred years. She was just full of mysteries.

"I can't but think that maybe Mary's an immortal witch or something. Living in the mountains and all."

"Yeah, I thought that too, just now. Well, I guess it can't be helped with this heat."

We were in the middle of an overgrown forest.

Well, Mary's house was at the end of a path so complex and winding that I really had no idea if it was really the middle or not, but Kido and I chattered in front of it while shielding our heads from the sun.

"So, what're we going to do? We can't do anything until we get inside."

"Mary told us to wait while she cleaned up the place, so it can't be helped, right?"

In this very unusual circumstance, how could I so simply feel like I'd been invited to hang out at a girl's house?

Normally, it might even be nice that my heart would start beating faster, but frankly speaking, I didn't have the mood for it at all right now.

Just when I thought I'd take a nap while waiting, Konoha's face came into view as he peered down at me.

"What is it?"

"Ah, um....."

When we'd left the hideout, we had made Konoha carry a huge rucksack in case we found something we'd want to take back, but since Mary had packed various drinks and other things along the way, he had completely fallen into the role of a carrying mule.

Although, considering the amount of movement that this guy had pulled off yesterday and something like this was probably nothing to him, I couldn't help but feel a little bad.

"Um, well, here....."

Konoha took out a drink from the bag and held it out to me.

"You didn't look like you were feeling too well earlier, so I was wondering if you were okay."

I was slow to react, due to his sudden kindness, but realizing that this was Konoha's way of showing goodwill, I gladly accepted it from him.

"Hey, thanks. Feel free to have something to drink, too."

After I said this, Kido pointed at me and added, "If you drink too much, you'll wind up like him, so be careful."

"Aaaaahh! Give me a break! I told you, I'm sensitive about that!"

"Oh, are you? Sorry, my bad."

Kido said nonchalantly and patted my shoulder.

What terrible treatment. NEETs were fragile creatures, so their health declines at the slightest things. Couldn't she treat me a little more gently?

Just as we started making a bunch of noise like this, the front door of Mary's house suddenly opened.

"I-I'm sorry it took so long. You can come in now!"

Mary had only stuck her face out the door, and with a clink of the key that she always wore about her neck as a pendant, she ducked inside again.

“Alright, let’s get going.”

Saying this, I stood up, along with Kido, and stretched once.

“It’ll be nice if we can find something new.”

The objective this time was to find out about the mystery of eye abilities, as well as Mary’s family. We’d also mentioned how it’d be ideal if we could find some information about the “other world,” as well.

At the very least, if we could learn more about Mary’s family, it would shed some light on things.

“I wonder if we’ll be able to find out where Hiyori is.”

The moment I placed my hand on the door to enter the house, Konoha murmured this quietly beside me.

“Hm~ We don’t have enough information about that, so it’s hard to say..... We’ll keep an eye out for some kind of hint, at least. Well, let’s just try looking first.”

Saying this, I patted Konoha on the back, and he nodded in response.

“Pardon the intrusion~ Oh, woah.....”

When I finally opened the front door, the inside was like a life-sized dollhouse.

The room was surrounded by bookshelves filled with old books.

“This is a really nice room.”

I said as I looked around, and whether because she was happy or embarrassed, Mary stared bashfully at the floor.

“Grandfather made this house. That’s what Mother told me.”

“Your grandpa, all by himself!? There’s no way. Right, Kido?”

I looked over at Kido, who had come in after me, but Kido was looking around the room with an amazed expression, as if she had never seen anything like it before.

“..... Didn’t you say you came here before?”

“No, I didn’t actually come in last time! Anyway, this is a really nice room, Mary..... I’m jealous”

After Kido had reacted in the best way possible, Mary replied shyly with “Ehehe, thank you.”

She then went to sit in a chair by the window, and said, “It’s sure been a while...” while staring outside.

“Shintaro, I honestly want to live here.”

Kido turned towards me and declared this matter-of-factly.

“W-won’t it be kind of tough living here?”

As I said this, Kido started muttering things like, “Yeah, but.....” and “What about food.....”

On the other hand, Konoha had a serious face on, and seemed to be searching for something in particular from the bookshelf.

It looked that this guy was actually taking this seriously, unlike our leader.

As I watched him, Konoha unexpectedly reached his hand out towards one of the books. Had he discovered something?

Suddenly, Konoha turned towards Mary and called out to her.

“C-can I take a look at this book?”

“Huh? Sure, I don’t mind.”

“Thank you!”

As soon as he said this, Konoha took the book out and started flipping through the pages. His serious face was completely different from his usual one.

“H-hey. Did you find something?”

Even when I asked him, Konoha seemed to be completely engrossed in the book, and was still flipping through the pages.

Curious about what was in it, I walked up next to him. The moment I saw the page that Konoha had it opened to, I understand why he was so serious.

“H-hey, isn’t this a.....”

“Yeah, I was surprised.”

On the open page was a drawing of a huge dragon. There was an English comment written in cursive beside it, but Konoha was more focused on the drawing of the dragon.

“..... It’s so cool.”

My shoulders dropped heavily. I was an idiot to have expected anything from him.

Well, in the first place, it wouldn’t be so easy to just find something. I felt really stupid for getting so excited in spite of this fact.

As I slumped down with my mood, this time it was Kido that tapped my shoulder.

“Shintaro, I found something crazy.”

Wondering what it could possibly be this time, I turned around and saw that Kido was holding something that looked like a sketchbook.

On the cover, the word “Secret” was written in thick, black letters.

“Hey now, this is...”

“Yeah, it seems like they were up to something dangerous.....”

Kido said, and slowly began to open the cover of the book.

On the page was a rather original drawing of a girl who I supposed was Mary, running around with a sword in hand.

Was she the heroine of some kingdom? But judging by the crown she was wearing, she could royalty of some sort, too.

We turned the page.

This time, there was a drawing of Mary riding a thick-legged creature that looked like a dragon or a lizard.

Was she trying to stab the dragon-thing?

Mary had a sword in her hand, but maybe she under some kind of spell. Although she should be in the middle of battle, Mary looked impressive with a huge smile on her face.

We turned the page.

On the next page, there was a picture of Mary dancing intensely.

Some kind of celebration for defeating the dragon-thing?

But looking at it closely, the dragon was dancing, too. Even though he'd been stabbed with a sword already, what kind of negotiations skills did she use for them to have reconciled already?

Since a while ago, Kido had been snorting every time she turned the page, and already seemed to be having difficulty breathing. In the end, this sketchbook hadn't helped us at all.

"Kyaaaaah! Don't look at that—!"

The moment that Mary, who had been staring out of the window, realized we were reading this book, her face went bright red and she jumped up from her seat.

"Sorry..... Mary..... Heh, hehe....."

Kido seemed greatly amused by the illustrated adventure, and was on the verge of collapse as she held her stomach in laughter.

"Th-these are just doodles! So, so..... Aaahh! So embarrassing!"

Mary screamed while holding her face with both hands. It was probably my imagination that her hair was quivering ever so slightly.

"That's pretty amazing to have yourself as the protagonist, though."

I commented offhandedly, which only made Kido laugh harder.

Mary screamed again in embarrassment.

To think that we'd uncovered this dark past so magnificent.

I was sure that it was tough for Mary right now, but at the same time, I strongly hoped that she'd grow from this.

Kido sat down in a chair, and had started to steady her breathing again.

However, she continued to snicker whenever she thought back on it, making Mary cry out, “No moreee,” each time.

“Hey, Mary. Is there anything like a diary lying around?”

Thinking that we’d better start searching seriously, I asked Mary this, and she turned towards me with a glare.

“I don’t have anything else weirder than this……!”

“Ahhh, no, not yours! I mean maybe a diary that belonged to your mother or something—I was just thinking, she might have written down something important.”

I hurriedly explained, and Mary stopped glaring at me.

“Hmm…… Ah, I think she did write a diary…….”

“Really!? Where is it?”

As I asked this, Mary began to think, “I remember that she really treasured it, but where did she keep it again……?”

“Um, above the bookshelf……?”

“About the bookshelf, right!? Did you hear that, Konoha!?”

Konoha replied, “Y-Yeah!” and began searching the top of each bookshelf.

However, he wasn’t able to find any diary.

As Konoha searched the top of the last bookshelf, he called back, “It’s not here~”

“Not the top of the bookshelf…….”

“Hey! Seems like that’s not where it is! Konoha!”

Konoha answered, “G-got it!” and stopped looking.

“Um…… The garden…….”

“Konoha! The garden!”

Konoha replied, “Got it!” and dashed out the front door.

“…… Or not.”

As expected, it wasn't the garden. Sorry, Konoha. I'll treat you to juice later.

Although Mary was still nodding in thought, there was still one place that the diary could possibly be.

"Mary, that pendant about your neck—it's the key for the house, right?"

"Hm? Yes, that's right. It used to belong to Mother, though....."

Mary held up the pendant, and the key made a clinking noise.

The fact that it made any sound at all was because there were actually two keys.

One was much smaller than the key for the house. We could only see one entrance, and it probably wasn't a spare key.

It was simple. When I'd looked around the room, the only piece of furniture with a keyhole had been a small desk that was placed between the bookshelves.

"That other key is for the desk over there, right? Maybe the diary is in the desk drawer....."

No, it couldn't be.

Mary aside, if the diary was really in a place so obvious, we wouldn't be thinking so hard about it now.

The diary couldn't possibly be in that desk.

But if it wasn't, then where.....

"Huh?"

After hearing my words, Mary looked back and forth several times between the key she was holding and the small desk, before making a shocked expression.

"I didn't notice at all....."

"What....."

Ahh, just what had she been doing for a hundred years..... I began to think, but I remembered that she was the type to dance with a dragon that she'd just tried to stab to death.

There were probably things going on in her head that I wouldn't be able to understand.

Feeling a little letdown, I looked out the window, and for a brief moment, saw a white figure dash past.

Just as I thought that we'd better call him back inside, Mary clutched the key and headed for the small desk.

"..... We'll just leave him for now."

Sorry, Konoha. There'll be restrictions, but I'll treat you to a meal next time.

As I casually thought this, Kido had finally regained her breath.

"..... heh. Sorry about that, Shintaro. I'm fine now."

Yeah, but we're almost finished here, I muttered to myself.

Kido seemed to have recovered from her sudden laughing fit.

Although she looked a bit tired.

"I thought that desk looked kind of suspicious, too. Really, good job, Shintaro."

What was she saying? Was I the only one that thought she hadn't done anything but laugh?

"..... Well, it'd be great if we can learn anything from what's written in the diary."

At the very least, we might be able to find out something about Mary that she wasn't able to explain to us herself.

Maybe it would be something connected to eye abilities.... Or the "other world."

I held my expectations high.

I was fine with anything. Even if it was something small, it could end up being a key that connected everything.

A small click echoed throughout the room.

"Shintaro! I found it!"

Mary said this while holding a dark blue book that looked like a dictionary.

It was pretty thick for a diary.

Mary walked back over and placed the diary down on top of the desk with a soft thump.

It looked like a spell book you'd see in an RPG or something, and up close, it gave off an intimidating feeling.

How long had this been used?

If there were things written about Mary, then probably at least a couple hundred years.

Suddenly, we heard the door behind us open, and when we turned around, Konoha came tottering over.

"S-sorry..... I couldn't find it."

It all went quiet. If I could hear the sound of my conscience taking a blow, it would probably be the sound of an explosion.

"Ah, uh, about that....."

I started to stutter, but Konoha's gaze fell on the diary on the desk.

I started to feel nervous again.

"Oh, you found it. What a relief....."

However, Konoha truly looked relieved as he said this.

Ahh, he was such a good guy.....

But at the same time, I also felt feelings of remorse. I would definitely treat him to something to eat.

"Well, we've found it but, uh, Mary... Before I suddenly start reading it, I think you should look through it first....."

As expected, it couldn't be pleasant to have someone just look through the personal matters of your relatives.

However, Mary only replied, "Everyone's pain might be relieved a little from this, so it's okay."

Everyone's pain. Everything that every members of this group had gone through.

We might not be able to regain our happiness just by knowing.

But, if we could find a way to move on by knowing, then we had to find out the truth.

"Alright. Then, I'll start reading."

There was nothing written on the cover of the thick diary, and was simply a deep ultramarine color.

The other three crowded around me to look at it together.

Holding it in a manner where all of us would be able to see, I finally lifted the front cover.

*

The contents of the diary were things that we, who had been blessed to live as "normal" humans, would have never known.

Truly deep, and truly sad.

Inside, was the bizarre life of those that had continued to cherish something.

Even now, I still can't forget what I felt when I turned the pages.

I'm certain that I won't ever forget about her, either.

At that time, when I opened the cover, I, who had not even a reason to know of the things that were about to unfold, could only speak the name that was written there.

"Azami"



Shinigami Record III

Day 1014.

The everyday rain showed no sign of weakening, and continued to drench the leaves of the overgrown trees.

With the changing season, the temperature gradually rose, but the continuous bad weather did little to raise my mood.

With each drop of rain that fell before my eyes, the fragrance of the grass rose up, bringing with it the scent of summer.

“..... How much nerve does he have?”

In this downpour of rain, although still misshapen in appearance, the construction of my house was finally beginning to take shape.

Today, as usual, I continued to tirelessly follow the smiling boy as he moved about the random piles of materials and tools.

“With this much rain, wouldn’t it be normal to rest? From the standing of a frail human whose wounds heal so slowly, what is he being so overly self-confident about?”

I muttered this alone in the poorly-built shack (with a built-in bath), enough to withstand the wind and rain at least, that was a short distance from the building site of my house.

Throwing open the door, I sat cross-legged to watch him; doing this had already become part of my daily routine.

At this rate, it wouldn’t be long before its completion.

Although he had been a brat that knew nothing about building houses at first, now that he was masterfully working, it was quite pleasant.

Well, naturally, it was only thanks to my help that he was able to get this far.

In the beginning, it only took a few sharp words of, “Don’t you know anything about building?” to bring him to tears, and so, taking pity, I taught him everything I could.

That was the only reason that a house could be built in such a short period of time.

Even so, he was also rather spirited for a human to cut, carry, and assemble this much material on his own.

The house itself was still far from perfect, but I decided not to judge too harshly.

It had already been three years since he had begun building it.

Although to me, it had been a short time that had flown by, considering his hardships, it must have felt like a long, three years.

But, it wasn't as if I was trying to be protective of him or anything.

It was simply that it would be a waste if he were to die before finishing the house, especially after I'd discovered how useful he was. That's all it was.

In the first place, he seemed to be a very honest fellow that stuck to his word. I was sure that he'd leave after finishing the house, as was promised.

And then, I would be able to live in peace in this house, all on my own. It was a brilliant plan I had come up with three years ago.

Crossing my arms as I heaped praise on myself, the thunder rumbled.

I noticed that the rain had gotten stronger.

Time-wise, the sun would soon set. He would probably be returning before long.

And as expected, Tsukihiko appeared moments later.

He was covered in mud from head to toe, just as I had imagined, and as usual, I expressed my disgust.

"I made a lot of progress today. It shouldn't be long before it's finished. So, what d'you think? Is it coming out to your like....."

"Dirty. Go bathe."

I pointed towards the bathroom, and Tsukihiko replied, "Ahaha, you're right. Sorry, sorry," before heading straight for the bath.

Although I called it a poorly built shack, it still proved useful.

By Tsukihiko's proposal, at first it had been nothing but a roofed shelter built in a place where I could easily view the construction, but it had gradually been expanded upon to become what it was now.

I had gotten angry at him when he'd made a space for himself to sleep here, but realizing that the construction would go quicker if he stayed close to the site, I reluctantly allowed him to live here part of the time, as well.

Well, as long as there wasn't any harm, the speed of the construction would indeed increase, and while I still had my doubts, I would put up with it until the house was completed.

Yes, I would be patient until it was completed.

And once it was, I would at last attain my own place of belonging. I would think of it as patience until then.

.....Even so, was I spoiling him too much by allowing him to take a bath?

But it'd be a problem if he suddenly collapsed. And the bigger problem being that the house couldn't be completed.

These thoughts were soon drowned out by the splashing and shout I heard from the bathroom,

"Thank you for this bath! I'm so happy!"

Day 1032.

The long-continuing rain ended, and the signs of summer could finally be felt.

I avoided the shining rays of sunlight, and splashed my feet around in the bucket of water that Tsukihiko had brought.

"Heeey, that part's sticking out a bit~"

When I called out to him, Tsukihiko waved back.

As usual, today, he was silently engaged in the construction of my house. Today, it would seem that he was working on the roof.

In spite of the blazing sun, his white skin remained untouched, making him stand out strongly against the black roof.

Perhaps it was due to some genetic defect that even his hair was white, despite still being no young; he was a strange one.

In any case, although I had pointed out a part of the roof that was loose, he seemed to have mistaken it for a cheer of encouragement.

He merely waved back at me with a smile, and showed not the slightest sign of fixing the area in question.

“Heeey, that’s not it! Look at your feet, would you!”

Tsukihiko finally realized I was trying to tell him something, and leaning in my direction slightly, he called back, “Huh? What’d you say!?”

I was beginning to grow irritated of this frustrating exchange. Why hadn’t this moron heard me the first time?

“I said! Look at your feet..... Ah!”

The moment I began to shout at him, Tsukihiko lost his balance on the roof.

And just like that, his body separated from the roof, and gave way to gravity.

I almost couldn’t think when suddenly faced with this sight, but my mind forcefully stabilized itself.

What do I do? What should I do in a time like this?

What power could I..... No, it was useless. I didn’t possess a power that could help Tsukihiko in this situation.

In a single moment, my head filled with thoughts.

However, I couldn’t think of any effective way to save Tsukihiko from this distance.

Tsukihiko’s body had shown no resistance, and had disappeared behind the house to somewhere I couldn’t see from here.

It was if my heart had frozen.

If he had fallen from this height, it was sure to be life threatening.

Overturning the water-filled bucket, I bolted towards where I thought Tsukihiko had fallen.

If he had at least fallen feet first.....

However, judging from the last image of Tsukihiko that I had seen, was now seared into my eyes, I had a feeling that he hadn't fallen in such a way.

"Tsukihiko!"

I turned the corner around the house, and searched the ground.

However, Tsukihiko was nowhere in sight.

Before I could think of what had happened, I heard a voice from above me.

"Whew, that was close. Hm? What's wrong, Azami?"

When I looked up, I saw Tsukihiko hanging onto the edge of the roof with one hand.

Seeing that boy who wore a frivolous smile as usual, I felt rage, rather than relief, bubble up.

"Don't joke around, you fool! How can a weak creature such as you be so careless!"

When I yelled, Tsukihiko paled with a smile still on his face.

"Huh?"

By the looks of it, he didn't seem to understand why he was being yelled at.

I opened my mouth to let forth another wave of shouts, but being overwhelmed by so many different emotions, I couldn't speak in the way I would have hoped.

In the end, the only thing that left my mouth was the very childish word, "Moron!"

And with that, I turned my back on him.

"Refill the water in the bucket. Also..... Don't climb the roof anymore today."

Tsukihiko panicked at my words, and replied, "G-got it!"

I was not pleased.

Not in the slightest bit.

More than anything, I was angry at myself for becoming so scared over something so trivial.

Furthermore, when I went back, there would be no water-filled bucket. It was extremely infuriating.

I decided to not speak with him again today. He was sure to be disheartened by that.

As I thought of this, my mood lifted, and my anger eased a little.

Day 1058.

“He’s late……!”

It was a refreshing sunset.

The wind that blew felt pleasant, and created a comfortable temperature when combined with the setting sun.

“The food ran out, so he went to get more from his house? And what faraway house has he gone to take food from?”

In contrast with the vivid scenery, thunderclouds were rumbling within my chest.

He had left after saying, “Since the food ran out, I’ll be going to get more, but I’ll be back by noon.” However, wasn’t it already evening?

Tsukihiko always came here from his house, with the roundtrip being around three hours.

Even when he was late, he always had clear reasons for that being so, such as the rain or the snow slowing the trip back. But even at the latest, he had never come back after the sun had set.

The evening soon became dyed in ultramarine.

As if to ridicule me for waiting in vain, the sun had set in the blink of an eye, and even as it became night, Tsukihiko still did not return.

“What could he possibly be thinking? And he was so confidently boasting yesterday that it would be completed in one more week.”

Leaning against the outside wall of the shack, I complained to myself.

I could hear the quiet cries of insects in the distance, but as usual, there were no signs of life anywhere around here.

Instead, the only thing that I could hear was the loud thumping of the heart in my chest.

Perhaps he wouldn't be returning tonight.

It made sense if I thought about it; normally, one would avoid travelling deep in the forest at night.

For example, if you decided to set off at sunset, it would become nighttime halfway, making it dangerous, so it made much more sense to start the journey back the following morning.

Or could he be napping somewhere because it had been so nice out today.....

No, that would be a little too dangerous.

Perhaps he'd fallen asleep after arriving at his house, then.

In the midst of the darkness, I came up with the various possibilities as to why Tsukihiko hadn't returned yet.

"Well, I'm sure he'll be back by tomorrow morning."

.....

"Or perhaps he'll appear if I wait just a while longer."

..... No, that really was merely wishful thinking.

However, I simply couldn't get over the wild idea of wanting it to be so.

I had already come up with a reason that was much more logical, a reason that could be no better.

So why had I tried to cover it up by coming up with superficial, wishful thoughts?

As soon as I realized this, those realistic thoughts finally appeared in my mind.

"Has he run away?"

Logically, that made the most sense.

In the first place, it was abnormal that he would continue to build a house here for as long as three years without a single complaint, or any compensation at all.

Truthfully, I couldn't understand what he was thinking to continue staying here.

I no longer believed that he was trying to deceive me, but I still found it difficult to understand the purpose behind his actions.

..... Come to think of it, he'd said something to me when we'd first met. What was it again?

When I'd heard it, I had felt rather disturbed. Although I hadn't paid much attention to the exact words at the time, if I remembered correctly.....

"It'd be nice if I could stare at you from up close..."

The moment I remembered those words, I felt like my heart clench tightly.

My face grew hot, and it became difficult to breathe.

What an embarrassing thing to say.....!

What a fool!!

No, actually, what if he.....

"..... Is he in love with me?"

As soon as I said it out loud, my mind felt like it was going out of control.

No, that couldn't be. He was a human, an entirely different species than I was.

However, he was a man, and I was a..... well, a woman, I suppose.

So he must have meant it in the way that men want to stare at women.

As I distressed and these conflicts came up, a monotone, defeated note came out of my mouth.

Had he said anything else?

Remember. He must have said something. I was sure of it.

What was it? Something that was even more ridiculous.....

“From this moment on, I’m willing to listen to anything you say.”

Unable to stand it, I jumped up. My heart felt like it might rupture if I hadn’t.

My breath quickened and dizziness overcame me.

The fool was me.

From the very beginning, he had clearly told me the reasons for staying here.

I realized it then.

He was in love with me.

“Wh-which would mean that everything up until now.....”

The moment I realized this, I understood so well, to the point that it was embarrassing, the real reason that he had stayed here these three years.

“Then that means, that time, he meant.....? And when he did *that*, too!? Ahhhh.....
What a fool!”

No, the real fool here was me.

The reason was so simple that, on the contrary, I started to find the reasons behind everything.

By now, simply remembering his face for even a moment was enough to make my face feel like it would erupt in flames.

After I had finished remembering, and also anguished, I was finally able to regain my composure.

I took deep breathes to steady my breathing again.

Breathing in the cool air, it felt like my flushed body was being cooled from the inside.

“..... Hurry and come back, you fool.”

Before I even noticed, it had become painful to be alone.

When that fool came back, I would complain.

I was sure that even that would please him; he was a strange one like that.

Day 1059.

It'd been a while since I'd cried this much.

Even when morning had come, Tsukihiko still hadn't returned; that was around when the tears had started.

"Come on, don't cry anymore. I'm completely fine, alright?"

Tsukihiko said this in an attempt to comfort me as I cried while hugging my knees, but still the tears would not stop.

I never would have imagined that he would return covered in wounds.

The person you were waiting for suddenly shows up looking like that. Anyone would cry out of shock.

"I really am sorry I'm so late. Things got kind of complicated..."

Tsukihiko said this with a small smile and scratched his head.

He was smiling while covered in wounds. What an idiot.

"..... Why are you so injured?"

I held back my tears enough to ask this, and Tsukihiko clearly made a shocked expression.

He hurried to smile again, but I saw right through it.

"What? Is it something you can't tell me?"

"Ah, no! That's not it. It's just....."

At Tsukihiko's indecisive behavior, I said sharply to him while sniffing, "Out with it."

He paled, seeming to get the idea, sighed softly and began to speak.

“Umm, do you remember when we first met? You know, when you were really deep in thought and I called out to you..... Huh? What’s wrong?”

Feeling my face grow as hot as fire, I buried my face behind my knees.

I had remembered it only yesterday. I couldn’t possibly have forgotten it already.

With my face still hidden behind my knees, I urged him on, “Continue.”

“O-okay. Umm. At that time, I was right in the middle of going home from the battlefield. Since I was told that they couldn’t use me.”

Come to think of it, when we’d first met, he *had* been wearing those clothes.

Still, it was cruel to be told that he was useless. Well, it wasn’t as if I hadn’t said similar things previously.

“And when I was walking, I saw you. I thought you were so pretty, so I ended up following you.”

“D-don’t go explaining every detail.”

Although I tried to hide it when I spoke, truthfully, I felt like dying from embarrassment.

Despite the fact that I barely felt anything up until now, I had come to discover these numerous emotions.

“Ahaha, sorry. But that’s why when you told me to build a house, although I thought that it was an impossible request, I was genuinely happy. I thought that I could be of use to someone so pretty.”

“Nn, th-thanks.”

“Huh!? You’re acting kind of strange today.”

Seriously, how oblivious could he be?

It was obvious that my usual behavior was only ill-spirited teasing.

However, at this point, I couldn’t help but find that quality of his rather endearing.

..... Was I really pretty?

..... I see.

..... Yes, this was good.

“Anyway. Both my parents passed away when I was young, but they’d left behind a fair amount of land, so I don’t have to worry about property, but yesterday... I came across some people from the village for the first time in a while.....”

As Tsukihiko said this, he quieted.

“And what about coming across them? You’re also part of the village, aren’t you?”

“That’s... true, but, see, I look different from the others, so we don’t get along very well.”

The moment that Tsukihiko said this, I understood everything. And at the same time, feelings of hostility rose up in my mind.

“..... Is that all?”

“Huh?”

“Is that the only reason they did that to you?”

Tsukihiko had a huge bruise on his face. His clothes, as well, were covered in mud.

All of this must have been done by the people from the village.

I had not a hair width’s of interest in the disputes among humans, but simply because Tsukihiko was involved, I was extremely bothered by it.

I would do the same to the ones who had treated him this way..... No, I wouldn’t feel satisfied unless they experienced much worse.

I stood up immediately, but Tsukihiko, who seemed to guess what I had in mind, spread out his arms in front of me and muttered, “You can’t.”

“And why can’t I? You were treated horribly, weren’t you? You can’t complain if the people of the village have even a taste of what you went through.”

“No, it’s fine. That’s why I came here again today.”

Tsukihiko was still smiling.

Although I had thought of doing those things for him, when I was stopped by Tsukihiko himself, my chest hurt for some reason, and I felt that it would be a poor choice of action.

“..... Why? Aren’t you angry?”

“Hm? Well, of course I don’t think they their actions were right, but that’s exactly why I don’t want you to do the same thing.”

When I heard this, I had nothing to say in reply.

I didn’t want to be considered the same as the lot of them.

However, when I thought about how many more years that Tsukihiko would have to keep living where there were people like them, I felt uneasy.

..... Was he really alright with this?

Being surrounded by people who detest you, being treated like a fool every single day, and subjected to violence whenever they felt like doing so.

“Do not return to the village every again.”

I spoke those words without hesitation.

Yes, there was no need to go back. He should simply stay here forever.

If he did that, then he would no longer have to go through this kind of treatment.

However, there was no reply to what I had said.

When I looked up, Tsukihiko was clenching his fists, and standing there with a meek look.

Seeing him like this, I remembered the promise that I had made with him.

When I said told him, “Build a house here,” I had also said one more thing, “Once you’ve built the house, disappear.”

From the beginning, it had been decided that our relationship would only be until the house was completed.

What was I saying then, in spite of that?

That must be why Tsukihiko was making this face now. In these three years, I had come to understand so well that it was painful, how he was a man that kept his word.

“..... Sorry, forget it.”

The moment I said this, it felt like tears would form in my eyes again.

It was lonely.

It was lonely, so it couldn't be helped. I didn't want to part ways.

Ahh, why had I said something like that back then? I was a fool. An outright fool.

“..... I'm sorry.”

Tsukihiko muttered, as if forcing out the words.

I knew it all along. There was nothing unusual about it; a very obvious, natural thing.

..... But even so, I felt horribly embarrassed that I had expected something out of it.

Now then, I would have him quickly finish the house.

And after I had him disappeared, I would be alone.....

“Will you be my wife?”

“..... Yes.”

He embraced me.

It was my first time feeling another person's—feeling Tsukihiko's warmth.

As if they had melted away, the worries I had vanished completely.

Tears weren't only for the sad and painful times.

They fell even in times like this, it seemed.

“I’m sorry. I broke the promise.”

Hearing Tsukihiko’s blunt and honest words, I muttered as usual, “Idiot.”



Day 1072.

A mid-summer day.

The kind of weather that makes you lazy.

The blue sky was crystal clear, and the wind that blew scattered the white clouds.

“About time. I was growing tired of waiting.”

When I said this, Tsukihiko scratched his head and replied, “Ah, sorry about that.”

My finally-completed house, while misshapen in some areas, was rather satisfactory.

It was sure to withstand most minor kinds of weather.

After all, it had been built under my guidance. If it fell apart, then Tsukihiko was completely to blame.

“There’s a lot I want to say, but I’ll give it to you for completing it, at least.”

“Ahaha. Thanks. But you know, it sure is moving... To think that I’d be able to build something this big....”

Saying this, Tsukihiko gazed at the outside of the house and seemed to be immersed in his sentiments.

It was an impressive work that had taken three years. He really was pure to be so genuinely happy about it.

However, speaking of the grand size of it, there was something that I was curious about.

“..... Say, Tsukihiko.”

“Hm? What is it?”

Tsukihiko happily turned back to me.

“This house... Isn’t it much bigger than how I asked it to be in the beginning?”

Trembling, Tsukihiko paled with a smile still on his face.

“U-ummm..... Sorry. The truth is, I might have had some hopes while building it.....”

Tsukihiko said this uncomfortably.

Honestly... So he actually had no intention to leave from the start?

I was frustrated that it had turned out just as he wanted, but that the same time, I felt shy, as well.

“..... I haven’t said that I was against it.”

The moment I said this, Tsukihiko’s expression brightened.

“Oh, good! Ahh, I thought you were going to tell me to build another one.”

“Wh-what do you take me for!? Let’s just go in already.”

Just as I made to leave Tsukihiko behind and headed for the entrance, I noticed that beneath the outer wall of the house, within the neatly cut grass, was a single, blooming flower.

Wonder why only this one was blooming, I drew closer to the flower, and Tsukihiko quickly explained, “Ahh, that flower. I thought it was cute, so I just left it there.”

To say that a flower was cute, he really was an adorable fellow. I wished that he could be a little more masculine, but since this behavior suited him, it was hard to say anything against it.

The deep pink flower, though only one, was bravely in full bloom.

“..... What kind of flower is this?”

Crouching down to look at the flower, Tsukihiko crouched down beside me.

“Y-you don’t know? It’s pretty rare for you to not know something...”

“D-don’t say something so foolish. I simply can’t remember at the moment..... N-now hurry up and tell me what it’s called!”

Tsukihiko laughed softly at my response, and as he gently stoked the flower, he replied.

“The name of this flower is.....”

Children Record V

“Why would you say that?!”

Mary screamed that at me with an extremely threatening attitude.

Her hair that was dangling from side to side rippled greatly as if showing her emotions.

Her two pink eyes gradually flushed into a deep red color in tempo with her ragged breaths.

“O-oi, Mary. I’m sure Shintaro didn’t mean to say anything bad. Besides, it’s just a guess. You don’t need to be so.....”

Kido’s words were sort of right, but they were also a little off.

I hadn’t recognized my talk earlier as being a “possibility”.

I was convinced that that was the “truth”.

At Kido’s words, Mary went “Uuuuuuu...!” and, groaning as if she wanted to say something, began to spill tears.

At those tears, Konoha seemed to cower hesitantly, and looked back and forth between Mary’s face and my own.

“I, I’m...going outside...!”

“Oi, Mary...!”

Mary heatedly stood up, and, ignoring Kido’s quiet voice, jumped outside and left.

“I, I’ll, go after her!”

Having said that, Konoha also flew outside to chase after Mary. With that guy’s legs, it would probably be an easy chase.

Only the two of us, Kido and I, were left inside the room. Kido sighed a soft “Hahh...” and slumped down in her chair.

“Hey, Kido. What do you think?”

When I asked her that, Kido scratched her head roughly and replied, “I’ve got the exact same opinion as you.”

“It looks like, somehow, we did her wrong. In the end, if you look at it from Mary’s point of view, she probably heard “her own grandmother was the cause for the disturbance to everyone.””

“Well, there’s nothing we can do about it, is there? If you talk about it more carefully to her later, so that she properly understands, it’ll be fine.”

I sat down in the chair that Mary was sitting in earlier, in order to look Kido face to face.

In my head, I'd planned to organize this neatly, but there were too many things I couldn't swallow down.

"Well, with this, we pretty much know what Mary is."

"Yeah, as expected, it was written this accurately. Even if this was forced on you, you could understand it."

Kido said, and flipped through the open diary.

"Monsters.....huh. In the end, people don't change no matter what era it is."

Kido's face as she said that seemed to be languishing somewhere.

These guys had also probably received the same treatment as what was written in this diary.

"But even so, in the end, the main cause is this power called "clearing eyes"."

"Yeah, no matter how you think of it, I can't think of anything other than that.

Just...can you even call this an ability?"

Kido's opinion was also correct. Among the "10 abilities" that came up in the diary, no matter how you thought of it, only this "clearing eyes" ability didn't belong.

"No, I don't get it. At least, it definitely doesn't look like it's being "used", but..."

For as long as we read the diary, it didn't seem like we would be able to actually confirm with the person himself if it really was an "ability".

But, if these abilities had really created "that world", it'd probably be better for us to make sure that we really should be counting "clearing" as another one of them.

"Anyways, at our current situation, the people we've confirmed to "have abilities" are the five people who've dealt with Mary, huh."

"About Hibiya, I just don't get which of them could be residing in him right now. You also think the same about Konoha, don't you?"

"Yeah, I don't think there's any doubt about that. There's no way ordinary people with bodies of flesh and blood are able to jump tens of meters."

In the contents of the diary, there hadn't been anything that I could think of as being Konoha's ability.

If that was the case, then it was probably one of the abilities that hadn't had any details written: the abilities of "waking eyes" and "opening eyes". It was just a problem of which one it was.

"Anyways, if we include Konoha, then that's six people. There's still four ability-bearers out there who haven't been identified..."

"For the time being, we might be able to meet with whoever possesses the "clearing" ability and ask them for some information about "that world"."

"If that power's even appeared in the world on this side. If it hasn't, then we can't really do anything."

As a result, the information that we'd obtained from this diary had been something huge.

The mystery of "that world" and the "abilities" were beautifully connected, and

could now even be thought of as a signpost.

It may be that we've reached a point where, after just a little more, we'll be able to see the truth about these series of incidents.

If we continue on at this pace, it might even be possible for us to take over "that world" and bring back the people who are no longer here.

"That world", huh..."

"That world", y'know..."

Kido and I both shut up after saying that much. No, we were probably talking about the same thing.

"...Shouldn't we decide on some kind of name for this? It's hard to talk about it either way, though."

"What a coincidence. I was just thinking the same thing."

But, having said that, it's not like I really had any good sense about naming things. Well, it's not like a cool name is really necessary, as long as it's a fitting name that's easy to say.....

"How about "heat-haze daze"?"

When she said that, her eyes lit up and began to sparkle.

Ahh, this is probably a person with self-confidence...is what I sort of had a feeling about.

Sure enough, it was like Kido's expression was saying, "Pretty good, right?" as she waited for my reaction.

"By the way, "heat-haze" means something that's appeared and disappears soon.

"Daze" has the meaning of being "dazzled"..."

Ahh, on top of that, she's begun to explain it.

Like trying to explain a story she brought up with a slip of the tongue, it's tremendously frustrating. In all honesty, I wish she'd stop.

"O, oh. I got it. That's great, isn't it, and so..."

"No, wait. Listen to me. There's one more meaning behind the word daze....."

Nonono, that's a hassle.

We're done with this topic now, right. What kind of meaning are you trying to give to it.

I don't care what the meaning is, I said it's fine, didn't I.

"O, okay! Well, all of this makes a decent amount of sense, so we should go back now. It'd be a pain trying to get back in the dark."

"Hm? Ahh, that's also true. How about I continue talking more about the meaning again when we get back to the hideout?"

Take a break already. It's not like it's that great of a name, either.

Well, by the time we get back to the hideout, she'll probably have already forgotten about it.

Anyways, listening to her talk about this for a long time will be too painful. Let's just get back to the hideout quickly and make Momo listen to her in my place.

I stood up from my chair, and headed to the entrance.

I opened the door, and, maybe as a result of the sun's direct rays of light, my body temperature went up remarkably.

When I thought about having to return on that same road again, I suddenly felt tired. I'll catch a piggyback ride on Konoha.....no, that's no good. He's carrying a backpack.

In that case, I'll get him to carry me in his arms.....no, on the way here he was carrying Mary. Either way it's no good.

"Well then, I wonder where Mary is."

Kido, who had followed after me out of the house, said as she closed the door behind her.

Mary had said, "I'm going outside," but it hadn't been that long, so she couldn't have gotten very far.....

Kido occasionally looked around her surroundings while trembling slightly, and saw a bulky white silhouette flitting about on the other side of the house, far behind the bushes.

"Oh, she's here, she's here. O~i, Mary, I'm sorry about earlier! Come back he~re!"

When I said that, Mary, who was far away, seemed to scream something, but she was too far away and I couldn't hear her clearly.

"Did she say something...?"

I had no choice, so I separated the bushes and advanced forward, until I was close enough to be able to carefully confirm that it was her.

Like before, Mary screamed something, but just what was she trying to say?

Anyways, I advanced into the very depths, and from a certain position, the bushes in front of me disappeared from view as if they were never there.

Scared, my feet stopped moving.

As I did that, I was able to clearly hear a crying Mary screaming "Help meeee!" in a pitiable voice.

When I gingerly tried to get closer, from where the bushes stopped me to where Mary was standing, there was a cliff about 5 meters wide.

"Ma, Mary?! Why're you in a place like that?!"

When I was about to ask her how she managed to get across such a distance, I looked around, and, just slightly off into the distance, I could see a log spanning the gap like a bridge.

Mary began to cry a lot as she said, "I, I was c-chased b-by a beee!"

She'd probably said "I was chased by a bee."

It most likely meant she'd crossed on top of the log while running from a bee and gotten to the opposite side, huh.

“What kind of situation is this...”

Just then, Kido came up behind me, and, becoming aware of the situation, shouted “Mary?!” in a surprised voice.

“Oi, what should we do.....”

“No matter what do, we’re going to have to do something and help her, right? Oh yeah, where’d Konoha go?”

That’s right, a cliff of this size would be nothing for someone like him.

Something like jumping all the way to the other side, picking up Mary and jumping back to this side should be no trouble for him.

“That’s true. That guy’s timing, going off somewhere at a time like this...”

““Did he get lost?””

Both Kido’s and my shoulders fell.

The fact that he wasn’t here right now—was it because of that? Which way had he run off to, I wonder.

But anyways, without him, there was nothing we could do about the current situation.

As far as I could see in that state, telling Mary, “Cross that log again” would really be cruel.

But for me to cross it and take her across, it’d be impossible no matter how many times I did it. In the first place, I basically didn’t have the courage to cross the chasm all the way to the other side.

“Anyways, we’ll just wait for Konoha...”

As I was about to say that, in the next moment, a small yellowish object entered my field of view.

It flapped its wings very rapidly, and very quickly loomed in front of my eyes.

It was a bee.

“Gyaaaaahh!!”

At this sudden occurrence, I twisted my body away.

I have to get away from here immediately, I have to get away.....

The instant I thought that and stepped away, my foot masterfully kicked the air instead of the ground.

.....Crap, I messed up.

Kido’s shocked face entered my field of view, and very quickly became small.

As if being pulled along by an extremely powerful force, my body began to plunge headfirst to the bottom of the chasm.

.....Ahh, it’s no good. This can’t be helped.

I looked at Kido’s figure, still not too far off, and began to think of my own end.

This will hurt a lot, won’t it. Well of course it will, since it’s from this height.

Now that I think of it, when Ayano died, too, this is what she thought of. Though I hadn't understood anything from just looking from the rooftop, I get it now. So this is the kind of feeling it is.

"She was scared, wasn't she."

Immediately after I whispered that and closed my eyes, a shock ran through my body, and I lost consciousness.

※

The moment I opened my eyes, what jumped out at me was an abundant amount of blood flowing from a gaping wound in Konoha's quivering body.

Intuitively, I realized that he had saved me.

My body didn't hurt anywhere, but the scene in front of me was so crushing it felt like my chest had been pulverized.

Next to Konoha was a branch as large as a person's arm, growing as if it was stuck through the ground.

Blood clung onto the pointed tip of that withered branch.

That had probably pierced through his stomach.

Far above me, I could hear screaming voices, but right now, rather than paying attention to them, I was thinking with all of my might for a means to save the person right in front of me.

My cell phone had no reception.

Even if I carried him, I wouldn't make it in time.

Besides that, what could I do?

First aid. No good, it's not at a level where I could just do something or another.

Something. Isn't there something? A way to save this guy, something.....

"Why would you.....!"

I couldn't say anything besides that to Konoha, whose shaking had gradually begun to lessen.

At those words of mine, Konoha weakly whispered something.

At the same time, he coughed out blood, and his words were nearly lost in the sound of his coughing, but without a doubt, Konoha had said, "Because we're friends."

My body shook, and tears began to spill.

Had I done something for this guy?

No, there wasn't a single thing I'd done at all.
Even so, Konoha had covered for me, and could no longer move.

Even though the light had already vanished from Konoha's eyes, only his flowing blood still continued to spread on the earth.

.....Oi, I'm begging you, do something. You're in Konoha's body, aren't you? We're friends. I want to save him. I'm begging you, I'm begging you, so please.....

The next moment after I prayed that, I felt as if the air had frozen in an instant. Like I was being glared at by some kind of small animal; it was that kind of feeling. In the brief moment that I thought that, countless snakes jumped out from Konoha's motionless body, tying it up.
Konoha's eyes, which had, until just a moment ago, been lifeless, began to gleam dark red, and his pulse began to beat with a thump, to the point where I could hear it even at this distance.

Powerless, I could do nothing but sit there and stare, dumbfounded, as my friend was rebuilt right in front of my eyes.



Shinigami Record IV

The candlelight dimly illuminated the desk by the window.

After I had finished writing my first diary entry, I placed the pen down on the desk, and checked over the contents intently.

“Hmm... Is this good enough?”

Although I knew what a diary was, it had been my first time actually writing in one, and I had found it to be rather difficult.

While it was a good thing that I had today’s “outing,” which had been a relatively large event, to write about, starting tomorrow, what could I even write about?

However, after rereading what I had written, it was hard to say that today’s diary was anything particularly interesting.

“Seeing as how it’s the first entry, I thought I’d put the effort into writing, but..... This isn’t going well at all.”

I was shocked at my own lack of writing skill.

“Really? Personally, I think it’s really great.”

Hearing a voice from behind me, I couldn’t help but let out a shout of surprise.

Tsukihiko smiled as usual, and said, “Ahaha. Sorry, sorry,” before scratching his head.

“Wha—! Idiot, don’t go looking without permission!”

I had been careless, never thinking that he would peek at my diary. At least I hadn’t written anything strange..... No, I was sure it was fine.

“Anyway, I’m really happy that you mentioned me in there~”

Tsukihiko said this shyly, but I had only written about how he’d been chased by the bee, so what was he so happy about?

“Hmph, there weren’t enough characters to use, so I merely ended up writing you in, that’s all.”

In reality, there weren't anything like characters that I made sure appeared in the diary, but since it was annoying to please him, I simply settled for that.

"Is Shion asleep already?"

"Yeah. Since she played so much today... She's already fast asleep."

Shion had grown so much.

Honestly, I never would have imagined that I would raise a child, but that's how it'd turned out.

Although I still had a mountain of worries since it was our child, every day was filled with happiness right now.

"I wonder..... if Shion will be able to grow up well."

As I said this, Tsukihiko patted my head as usual and answered, "I'm sure that she'll grow up into a fine adult, and be as beautiful as you, Azami."

I hadn't exactly asked him to say that much. Although I always told him to stop since it was embarrassing, this habit of his never changed.

"Hmm~ I've gotten pretty tired, too. I guess I'll head to sleep soon."

Looking at Tsukihiko's drowsy face, he had aged considerably compared to the day we had first met.

That was how humans did—age.

He had run around with Shion so much with that aged body of his. He must be rather tired himself.

"I see. Rest well."

However, just as I thought I saw Tsukihiko make a slightly sad expression, he started to say this.

"Azami, won't you sleep with us once in a while? Shion's here too, so what d'you say?"

My chest hurt slightly at Tsukihiko's words, but I didn't show it and feigned indifference.

“.... Idiot. You know that I don’t need sleep. Are you asking me to be idle by your side for a night?”

“Ahaha. You have a point. Sorry, sorry.”

Tsukihiko laughed as he said this, but as I thought, he seemed sad somehow.

“It’s alright. We’ll be together again tomorrow, after all.”

As I said this, Tsukihiko grinned and said, “I know. See you tomorrow,” then patted my head again.

I waved slightly as I watched him disappear to the bedroom.

Once he’d disappeared from sight, the sadness I had been desperately hiding overflowed from the depths of my heart.

Tsukihiko must have said that because he’d seen the careless things I’d written in the diary.

Knowing him, he normally wouldn’t pay much attention to such things, but.....

“How many more times will the three of us be able to greet summer together?”

Although I had been the one who had written them, I now found those words to be very cruel.

It was a secret from Tsukihiko, but lately, I had been thinking about these kinds of things often.

It slipped my mind when I was together with him, but I knew that the flow of time wouldn’t allow it.

..... Most likely, I wouldn’t be able to be with him for very long.

First of all, it was certain that he would die before him due to his lifespan.

However, I should have known that from the very beginning.

Why was I worrying about this now, of all times?

It was because it would be lonely, if I could no longer be together with him.

Simply thinking about it was so lonely that tears quickly began to form.

But—no, *because* of that, I absolutely did not want to think that it would've been better if we had never been together.

After meeting him, and Shion had been born, there was the three of us.

To me, the time that we had spent together was irreplaceable.

That's why, it was fine. We should keep on living from now on, valuing each day more than we ever had.

We shouldn't spend these precious days in vain, thinking about sad things.

That was why, when the time to part came, I would cry without restraint.

I would curse at him, "Why did you die before me? Didn't you say that we would be together forever?"

He was terribly vulnerable to me saying those selfish things, so it was sure to bother him a great deal.

And then, he would apologize when scratching his head as usual, and I would forgive him. Yes, it was an excellent plan.

By the time I noticed, the tears had fallen to wet the cover of the diary.

It was hard to breathe. As much as I tried to hold them back, the lonely feelings continued to come forth.

Hadn't I just been thinking about how I would save my tears? I was so stupid.

..... I didn't want to. I didn't want to be apart from him. I wanted us to be together forever.

As my head filled with those thoughts, my mind gradually began to drift off.

Was it because I had cried so much? It was a strange feeling.

Even though I hadn't intended to do any deep thinking, I naturally felt like closing my eyes.

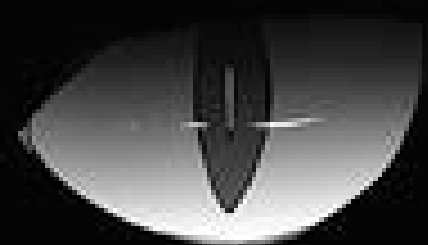
What was this?

I didn't understand exactly, but it wasn't unpleasant.

My sadness gently eased

Slowly

Slowly...



Welcome.

Welcome, my master.

Oh, have you finally decided to surrender?

You look quite haggard. No doubt, you have gone through much pain, yes?

Honestly, how long have I anticipated this moment?

Despite the fact that I have always been here waiting, you never even noticed.

In any case, the fact that you are here now means that you have a wish you desperately want granted, correct?

Oh, no, no. I don't mind if you don't tell us.

Don't you see? You are me, and I am you; there is nothing that I do not know about you.

Yes, yes, I know quite well.

I see, I understand.

..... My, how quaint that is!

Oh, no, no, I have heard all that I needed.

Still, for you to be troubled over something of this caliber, master, it would seem that you have changed quite a bit yourself.

However, no matter who my master is, or what wish they have, I am here to grant them, so please, rest assured.

Now then, you want to live with that human forever. That is your wish... However, frankly, that would be impossible in this world.

Oh, please do not look so discouraged.

Did I not say, "in *this* world"?

Yes, quite right, quite right.

I'm sure you're wondering now, "Then what world do you mean?"

Let me tell you. After all, that is why you have come all this way.

Yes, the abilities that you possess. You shall use them.

It is *because* of the very way those abilities are used that allow anything to be accomplished.

As I have explained earlier, your wish cannot be granted in this world.

While unfortunate, please acknowledge that I cannot tell you the reason for this.

However, in which case, you should simply create a *new* world!

For instance, how does a never-ending, repeating world sound?

You can spend an eternity there together with that human you love, and with your daughter, as well.

With the powers that you possess, it would be far from difficult to do.

Yes, of course! It is a power that belongs to none other than you, so it would only make sense that you should use it.

.....

..... Oh, it seems that time is almost up.

Let us speak in detail the next time we should meet.

I shall always be awaiting you here.

Yes, please feel free to ask me anything you'd like.

Now then, until we meet again in the next sweet dream

Children Record VI

The midday heat had diminished considerably, and it was somewhat easier to stay outside.

Even though the sky still hadn't gotten all that dark, the streetlights were beginning to gradually light up.

"A-are you serious....."

I doubted my eyes for a moment, but no matter how many times I confirmed it, the occurrence in front of my eyes was a "reality".

It was a vending machine near the hideout.

Until now, I used to always dismiss catchphrases like "If you get a hit, you'll get an extra!", but the vending machine's cliché electronic roulette in front of my eyes was, without a doubt, repeatedly flashing "Jackpot!"

"So it wasn't just an urban legend.....!"

When I thrust my hand into the drink receiving opening, the cold feeling of plastic bottles definitely numbered at two.

When I tried to take them out, without a doubt, two bottles of alluring black soda were definitely in there.

An essence of happiness flowed to my body from my palm.

Ahh, it'd be the absolute best if I could just have this all in one gulp right away, but this time only, I'd decided to be patient.

"I was saved the trouble of buying two,"

I said, and when I handed one of the carbonated drinks to Konoha, he thanked me with unornamented words of "Ah, thanks."

The two of us stood next to the vending machine, and I swiftly sent the soda into my body.

Swooshing, the popping sugary solution violently stimulated my body, from my throat, down my esophagus, and all the way to my organs in my stomach.

Ahh.....This is it. *This is it.*

This was that very "state of mind", unable to be reached by any other than those who have finished Death Hiking in the blazing sun.

I had just now, at that very summit, begun to interact with the soul of the soda.

A deep, violent, frenzied banquet that I could not even begin to talk about.

Ahh, so that's how it was. So soda is a passport to heaven that God granted to people equally.

"May soda be eternal....."

"Wh-what are you saying?"

Crap.

I'd been too engrossed in the soda and completely left Konoha behind.

But I came to notice that the soda in the bottle that Konoha held had been completely depleted, and became unbearably happy.

“It’s good, right?”

I said, and Konoha violently nodded twice.

While we’d been doing such things, the sky had become a dark soda-black color. Even though the sun was up for so long in the middle of summer, it’d already become this dark, huh.

“Time...it flies by in the blink of an eye.”

Konoha also gazed emptily up at the sky.

Even though he’d hidden it behind the plastic bottle, there was a large hole in his clothes.

I swiftly downed the remaining soda, and threw the container into the vending machine’s trash bin.

“Hey, Konoha.”

“What?”

Konoha looked over at me with his usual blank expression.

I had gradually begun to understand that this was who he was.

It didn’t show on his face, but the inside of his heart was not blank.

I’d thought that he was a strange and weird guy, but unexpectedly, he was just an extremely normal “good guy”.

“Earlier, you said we were friends, right?”

When I said that, Konoha replied with a short “Mm.”

“In that case. Don’t keep any painful thoughts to yourself. Aren’t you lonely?”

My life had been saved by this guy.

I knew that I wasn’t in a position to say those kinds of things, but I absolutely did not want him to have those kinds of thoughts anymore.

I didn’t know if Konoha understood or not, but once again, he replied with a short “Mm.”

For some reason, I felt as if that “Mm” contained more emotion than that first “Mm”, and I became slightly happy.

“.....It’s about time we went back. Danchou’s gonna get mad at us.”

“Mm.”

After walking for a bit, a shady building with a plate that read “107” adhered to it could be seen.

When I opened the door and stepped inside, Kido and Mary welcomed us at the same time with a “Welcome home.”

As expected, I was exhausted.

I fell on the sofa and stared, dead-tired, at the ceiling.

As I zoned out, Mary began to mend the opened hole in Konoha’s clothes, and Kido began to profusely say the words “Heat-haze daze.....” that she so liked.

The sound of the entrance being abruptly opened could be heard, and unclearly,

distinctive footsteps jumped into the room.

At that familiar voice, I summoned the last of my strength and said:

“Ahh, welcome home.”

Headphone Actor V

“..... Didn’t I just pass by here earlier?”

I muttered this in front of the ad banner of a distinctive e-book site.

Leaning against the ad, I sighed loudly.

“To think that I’d even forget the way back to my own house..... I’ve really gone and messed up.”

This world, which continued to become more complicated with each passing day, changed completely with a blink of an eye.

The gardening site that I had gone by yesterday had suddenly turned into a shady cosplay site.

And the band homepage of a young musician who continued to post soulful lyrics, had changed into a strange ranking site.

I understood, painfully, that this was a common, everyday occurrence, but as one would expect after two years of this, it was still hard to accept.

“Uuu~ Isn’t there any kind of good idea?”

Even when I tried flapping my arms, no good ideas came out of my sleeves.

Before I’d even noticed, I had completely turned into Ene.

My constant desire for sleep had entirely disappeared. I was cheerful 24/7, and spent my days as Master’s idol, Ene-chan. However.....

“It seems like it was really true. That story, I mean. It’s only that imposter who’s so confusinggg!”

I tried shouting in frustration.

Floating on my back, the limitless space around me was, as usual, filled with electrons.

“Well, this world is the real ‘imposter,’ though.”

Saying this, I spun around once, and finally truly focused on finding the way home.

Extending my index finger, I wrote the URL in midair.

“Is it a hit, or is it a miss~?”

Leaving it to luck after I’d written it, a familiar window popped up.

“Yes! It’s a big hit~!”

Making a splendid peace sign, I leapt into the window, and arrived in a small, square space.

“Wow~ This sure brings back memories~ Although I don’t have many good ones.”

It was a place where I had spent a lot of time crying.

So of course I wouldn’t have any good memories from that.

On the side of the space, there were various items lined up, such as “Received Messages” and “Sent Messages.”

From within those, I chose “Favorites,” and opened the e-mail at the very top.

“Sorry that it’s gotten pretty late.”

Saying this, I touched the “Reply” button that I hadn’t been able to choose two years ago.

Subject: Although it’s late...

Message:

I'm sorry that it's taken me this long to reply.

I couldn't believe it, and not knowing what to do, I just kept running away.... Sorry about that.

It was just as you'd said.

Everyone's here now, and I've even gotten pulled in as well.

Although it might be too late, starting now, I'll try my best with what I can do.

Also, he's gotten involved, too.

Although it was the same with Momo-chan, I was surprised.....

But, it looks like it'll be okay.

He's moving forward by his own choice. He's a boy, y'know, as expected.

Ayano-chan, you're over there, aren't you? I'm sorry. We'll definitely come to save you.

Well then, I'm off.

We're going to beat that "wide-eyed" guy, definitely.....

Let's meet again, for sure!